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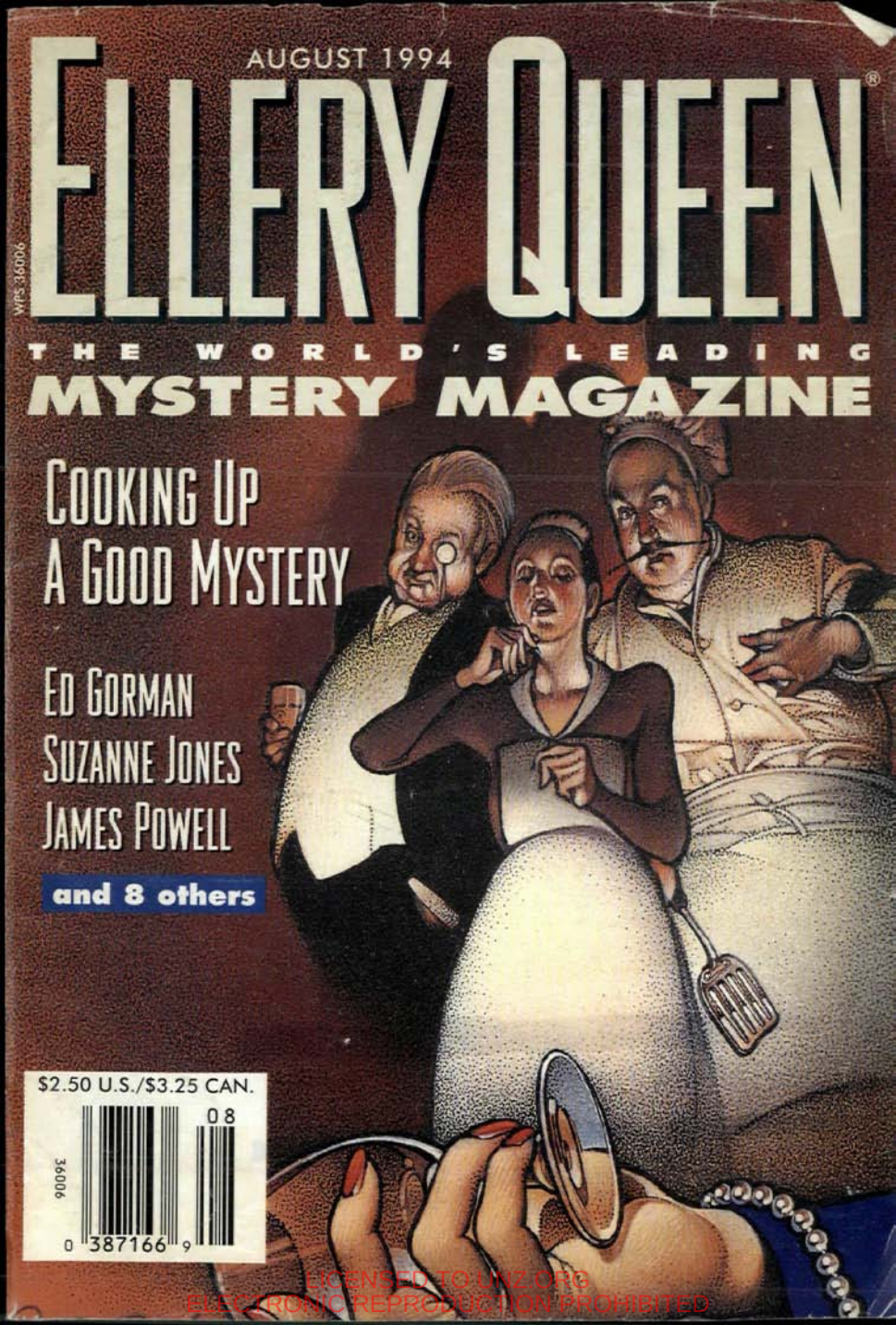

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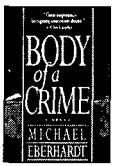

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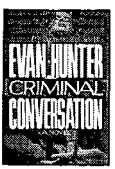

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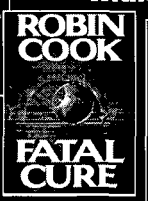

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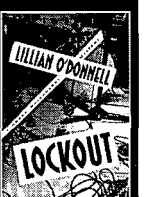

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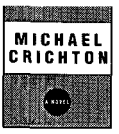

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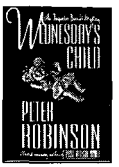

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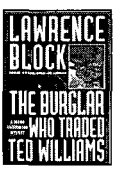

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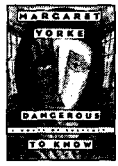

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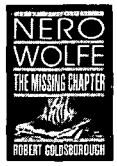

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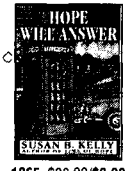

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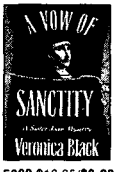

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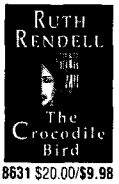

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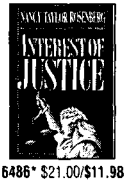

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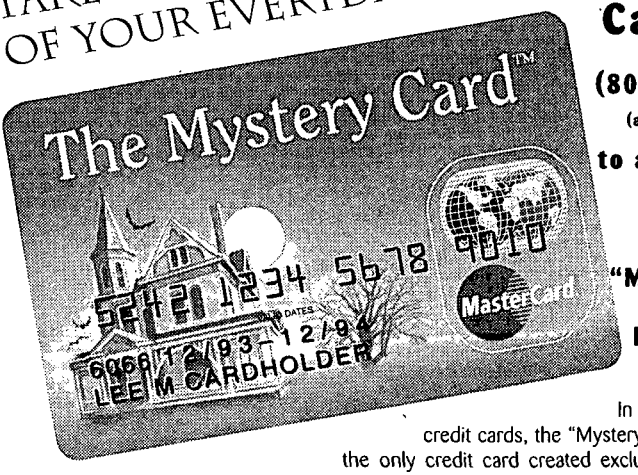

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a ***NEW*** short story by

ED GORMAN

Ed Gorman grew up in Iowa and lived sporadically on farms and acreages, which explains why nature plays so strong a role in many of his stories and novels. A collection of his stories recently published in England drew these observations from the Tally: *"Mr. Gorman succeeds in making of his material stories that are interesting and readable because he is intelligent, literate, mature, and compassionate. And he writes some very attractive prose." This new story for EQMM will also be published in October in the New American Library anthology* Partners in Crime, *edited by Elaine Raco Chase. . . .*

SEASONS OF THE HEART

by ED GORMAN

In the mornings now, the fog didn't burn off till much before eight, and the dew stayed silver past nine, and the deeper shadows stayed all morning long in the fine red barn I'd helped build last year. The summer was fleeing.

But that wasn't how I knew autumn was coming.

No, for that all I had to do was look at the freckled face of my granddaughter Lisa, who would be entering eighth grade this year at the consolidated school ten miles west.

For as much as she read, and when she wasn't doing chores she was always reading something, even when she sat in front of the TV, she hated school. I don't think she'd had her first serious crush yet, and the girlfriends available to her struck her as a little frivolous. They were town girls and they didn't have Lisa's responsibilities.

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This particular morning went pretty much as usual.

We had a couple cups of coffee, Lisa and I, and then we hiked down to the barn. It was still dark. You could hear the horses in the hills waking with the dawn, and closer by the chickens. Turnover day was coming, a frantic day in the life of a farmer. You take the birds to market and then have twenty-four hours to clean out the chicken house before the new shipment of baby chicks arrives. First time I ever did it, I was worn out for three days. That's when my daughter Emmy read me the Booker T. Washington quote I'd come to savor: "No race can prosper till it learns that there is as much dignity in tilling a field as writing a poem." Those particular words work just as well as Ben-Gay on sore muscles. For me, anyway.

The barn smelled summer sweet of fresh milk. Lisa liked to lead the animals into the stalls; she had her own reassuring way of talking to them in a language understood only by cows and folk under fourteen years of age. She also liked to hook them up.

The actual milking, I usually did. Lisa always helped me pour the fresh milk into dumping stations. We tried to get a lot of milk per day. We had big payments to make on this barn. The Douglas fir we'd used to build it hadn't come cheap. Nor had the electricity, the milking machines, or the insulation. You've got to take damned good care of dairy cattle.

I worked straight through till Lisa finished cleaning up the east end of the barn. This was one of those days when she wanted to do some of the milking herself. I was happy to let her do it.

Everything was fine till I stepped outside the barn to have a few puffs on my pipe.

Funny thing was, I'd given up both cigarettes and pipe years before. But after Dr. Wharton, back in Chicago when I was still with the flying service, told me about the cancer, I found an old briar pipe of mine and took it up again. I brought it to the farm with me when I came to live with Emmy. I never smoked it in an enclosed area. I didn't want Lisa to pick up any secondhand smoke.

The chestnut mare was on the far hill. She was a beauty and seemed to know it, always prancing about to music no one else seemed to hear, or bucking against the sundown sky when she looked all mythic and ethereal in the darkening day.

And that's just what I was doing, getting my pipe fired up and looking at the roan, when the rifle shot ripped away a large chunk of wood from the door frame no more than three inches to my right.

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I wasn't sure what it was. In movies, the would-be target always pitches himself left or right, but I just stood there for several long seconds before the echo of the bullet whining past me made me realize what had happened.

Only then did I move, running into the barn to warn Lisa, but she already knew that something had happened.

Lisa is a tall, slender girl with the dignified appeal of her mother. You wouldn't call either of them beauties, but in their fine blond hair and their melancholy brown eyes and their quick and sometimes sad grins, you see the stuff of true heartbreakers, a tradition they inherited from my wife, who broke my heart by leaving me for an advertising man when Emmy was nine years old.

"God, that was a gunshot, wasn't it?"

"I'm afraid it was."

"You think it was accidental, Granddad?"

"I don't know. Not yet, anyway. But for now, let's stay in the barn."

"I wonder if Mom heard it."

I smiled. "Not the way she sleeps."

She put her arms around me and gave me a hug. "I was really scared. For you, I mean. I was afraid somebody might have— Well, you know."

I hugged her back. "I'm fine, honey. But I'll tell you what. I want you to go stand in that corner over there while I go up in the loft and see if I can spot anybody."

"It's so weird. Nobody knows you out here."

"Nobody that I know of, anyway."

She broke our hug and looked up at me with those magnificent and often mischievous eyes. "Granddad?"

She always used a certain tone when she was about to ask me something that she wasn't sure about.

"Here it is. You've got that tone."

Her bony shoulders shrugged beneath her T-shirt, which depicted a rock-and-roll band I'd never heard of. They were called The Flesh Eaters and she played their tapes a lot.

"I was just wondering if you'd be mad if I wrote it up."

"Wrote what up?"

"You know. Somebody shooting at you."

"Oh."

"Mrs. Price'll make us do one of those dorky how-I-spent-my-summer-vacation deals. It'd be cool if I could write about how a killer was stalking my granddad."

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"Yeah," I said, "that sure sounds cool all right."

She grinned the grin and I saw both her mother and her grandmother in it. "I mean, I might 'enhance' it a little bit. But not a lot."

"Fine by me, pumpkin," I said, leading her over to the corner of the barn where several bales of hay would absorb a gunshot. "I'll be right back."

I figured that the shooter was most likely gone, long gone probably, but I wanted to make sure before I let Lisa stroll back into the barnyard.

I went up the ladder to the hayloft, sneezing all the way. My sinuses act up whenever I get even close to the loft. I used to think it was the hay but then I read a *Farm Bulletin* item saying it could be the rat droppings. For someone who grew up in the Hyde Park area of Chicago, rat droppings are not something you often consider as a sinus irritant. Farm life was different. I loved it.

I eased the loft door open a few inches. Then stopped.

I waited a full two minutes. No rifle fire.

I pushed the door open several more inches and looked outside. Miles of dark green corn and soybeans and alfalfa. On the hill just about where the mare was, I saw a tree where the gunman might have fired from. Gnarly old oak with branches stout enough for a hanging.

"Granddad?" Lisa called up from below.

"Yeah, hon?"

"Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. How about you?"

"God, I shouldn't have asked you if I could write about this for my class."

"Oh, why not?"

"Because this could be real serious. I mean, maybe it wasn't accidental."

"Now you sound like your grandmother."

"Huh?"

"She'd always do something and then get guilty and start apologizing." I didn't add that despite her apologies, her grandmother generally went right back to doing whatever she'd apologized for in the first place.

"I'm sorry if I hurt your feelings, Granddad."

Lisa never used to treat me like this. So dutifully. Nor did her mother. To them, I was just the biggest kid in the family and was so treated. But the cancer changed all that. Now they'd do something

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spontaneous and then right away they'd start worrying about it. There's a grim decorum that goes along with the disease. You become this big sad frail guy who, they seem to think, just can't deal with any of life's daily wear and tear.

That's one of the nice things about my support group. We get to laugh a lot about the delicate way our loved ones treat us sometimes. It's not mean laughter. Hell, we understand that they wouldn't treat us this way if they didn't love us, and love us a lot. But sometimes their dutifulness can be kind of funny in an endearing way.

"You 'enhance' it any way you want to, pumpkin," I said, and started to look around at fields sprawling out in front of me.

I started sneezing pretty bad again, too.

I spent ten minutes in the loft, finally deciding it was safe for us to venture out as soon as we finished with the milking for the day.

On the way out of the barn, I said, "Don't tell your mom. You know, about the gunshot."

"How come?"

"You must be crazy, kid. You know how she worries about me."

Lisa smiled. "How about making a bargain?"

"Oh-oh. Here it comes."

"I won't tell Mom and you let me drive the tractor."

Lots of farm kids die in tractor accidents every year. I didn't want Lisa to be one of them. "I'll think about it, how's that?"

"Then I guess I'll just have to think about it, too." But she laughed.

I pulled her closer, my arm around her shoulder. "You think I'm wrong? About not telling your mom?"

She thought for a while. "Nah, I guess not. I mean, Mom really does worry about you a lot already."

We were halfway to the house, a ranch-style house of blond brick with an evergreen windbreak and a white dish antenna east of the trees.

Just as we reached the walk leading to the house, I heard a heavy car come rumbling up the driveway, raising dust and setting both collies to barking. The car was a new baby-blue Pontiac with official police insignia decaled on the side.

I stopped, turned around, grinned at Lisa. "Remember now, you've got Friday."

"Yeah, I wish I had Saturday, the way you do."

We'd been betting the last two weeks when Chief of Police Nick Bingham was going to ask Emmy to marry him. They'd been going out for three years, and two weeks ago Nick had said, "I've never

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said this to you before, Emmy, but you know when I turned forty last year? Well, ever since, I've had this loneliness right in here. A burning." And of course my wise-ass daughter had said, "Maybe it's gas." She told this to Lisa and me at breakfast next morning, relishing the punch line.

Because Nick had never said anything like this at all in his three years of courting her, Emmy figured he was just about to pop the question.

So Lisa and I started this little pool. Last week I'd bet he'd ask her on Friday night and she'd bet he'd ask her on Saturday. But he hadn't asked her either night. Now the weekend was approaching again.

Nick got out of the car in sections. In high school he'd played basketball on a team that had gone three times to state finals and had finished second twice. Nick had played center. He was just over six five. He went three years to college but dropped out to finish harvest when his father died of a heart attack. He never got the degree. But he did become a good lawman.

"Morning," he said.

"Pink glazed?" Lisa said when she saw the white sack dangling from his left hand.

"Two of 'em are, kiddo."

"Can I have one?"

"No," he said, pulling her to him and giving her a kind of affectionate dutch rub. "You can have both of 'em."

He wasn't what you'd call handsome, but there was a quiet manliness to the broken nose and the intelligent blue eyes that local ladies, including my own daughter, seemed to find attractive, especially when he was in his khaki uniform. They didn't seem to mind that he was balding fast.

Emmy greeted us at the door in a blue sweatshirt and jeans and the kind of white Keds she'd worn ever since she was a tot. No high-priced running shoes for her. With her earnest little face and tortoiseshell glasses, she always reminded me of those quiet, pretty girls I never got to know in my high school class. Her blond hair was cinched in a ponytail that bobbed as she walked.

"Coffee's on," she said, taking the hug Nick offered as he came through the door.

We did this three, four times a week, Nick finishing up his morning meeting with his eight officers then stopping by Donut Dan's and coming out here for breakfast.

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Strictly speaking, I was supposed to be eating food a little more nutritional than donuts, but this morning I decided to indulge.

The conversation ran its usual course. Lisa and Nick joked with each other, Emmy reminded me about all the vitamins and pills I was supposed to take every morning, and I told him about how hard a time I was having finding a few good extra hands for harvest.

Lisa sounded subdued this morning, which caused Emmy to say, "You feeling all right, hon? You seem sort of quiet."

Lisa faked a grin. "Just all that hard work Granddad made me do. Wore me out."

Lisa was still thinking about the rifle shot. So was I. Several times my eyes strayed to Nick's holster and gun.

Just as we were all starting on our second cup of coffee, Lisa included, a car horn sounded at the far end of our driveway. The mail was here.

Wanting a little time to myself, I said I'd get the mail. Sometimes Lisa walked down to the mailbox with me but this morning she was still working on the second pink glazed donut. The rifle shot had apparently affected her appetite.

After the surgery and the recuperation, I decided to spend whatever time I had left—months maybe or years, the doctors just weren't very sure—living out my Chicago-boy fantasy of being a farmer. Hell, hadn't my daughter become a farmer? I inhaled relatively pure fresh air and less than two miles away was a fast-running river where, with the right spoon and plug and sippner, you could catch trout all day long.

I tried to think of that now, as I walked down the rutted road to the mailbox. I was lucky. Few people ever have their fantasies come true. I lived with those I loved, I got to see things grow, and I had for my restive pleasure the sights of beautiful land. And there was a good chance that I was going to kick the cancer I'd been fighting the past two years.

So why did anybody want to go and spoil it for me by shooting at me?

As I neared the mailbox, I admitted to myself that the shot hadn't been accidental. Nor had it been meant to kill me. The shooter was good enough to put a bullet close to my head without doing me any damage. For whatever reason, he'd simply wanted to scare me.

The mailbox held all the usual goodies, circulars from True Value, Younkers Department Store, Hy-Vee supermarkets, Drugtown, and the Ford dealer where I'd bought my prize blue pickup.

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The number-ten white envelope, the one addressed to me, was the last thing I took from the mailbox.

I knew immediately that the envelope had something to do with the rifle shot this morning. Some kind of telepathic insight allowed me to understand this fact.

There was neither note nor letter inside, simply a photograph, a photo far more expressive than words could ever have been.

I looked away from it at first, then slowly came back to it, the edge of it pincered between my thumb and forefinger.

I looked at it for a very long time. I felt hot, sweaty, though it was still early morning. I felt scared and ashamed and sick as I stared at it. So many years ago it had been; something done by a man with my name, but not the same man who bore that name today.

I tucked picture into envelope and went back to the house.

When I was back at the table, a cup of coffee in my hand, I noticed that Emmy was staring at me. "You all right, Dad?"

"I'm fine. Maybe just getting a touch of the flu or something."

While that would normally be a good excuse for looking gray and shaken, to the daughter of a cancer patient those are terrifying words. As if the patient himself doesn't worry about every little ache and pain. But to tell someone who loves you that you suddenly feel sick . . .

I reached across the table and said to Nick, "You mind if I hold hands with your girl?"

Nick smiled. "Not as long as you don't make a habit of it."

I took her hand for perhaps the millionth time in my life, holding in memory all the things this hand had been, child, girl, wife, mother.

"I'm fine, honey. Really."

All she wanted me to see was the love in those blue eyes. But I also saw the fear. I wanted to sit her on my lap as I once had, and rock her on my knees, and tell her that everything was going to be just fine.

"Okay?" I said.

"Okay," she half-whispered.

Nick went back to telling Lisa why her school should have an especially good basketball team this year.

On the wall to the right of the kitchen table, Emmy had hung several framed advertisements from turn-of-the-century magazines, sweet little girls in bonnets and braids, and freckled boys with dogs even cuter than they were, all the faces and poses leading you to

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believe that theirs was a far more innocent era than ours. But the older I got, the more I realized that the human predicament had always been the same. It had just dressed up in different clothes.

There was one photograph up there. A grimy man in military fatigues standing with a cigarette dangling from his lips and an M-16 leaning against him. Trying to look tough when all he was was scared. The man was me.

"Well," Nick said about ten minutes later.

Emmy and Lisa giggled.

No matter how many times they kidded Nick about saying "Well" each time he was about to announce his imminent departure, he kept right on saying it.

Emmy walked him out to the car.

I filled the sink with hot soapy water. Lisa piled the breakfast dishes in.

"Granddad?"

"Yes, hon?"

"You sure you don't want to tell Mom about the gunshot?"

"No, hon, I don't. I know it's tempting but she's got enough to worry about." Emmy had had a long and miserable first marriage to a man who had treated adultery like the national pastime. Now, on the small amount of money she got from the farm and from me paying room and board, Emmy had to raise a daughter. She didn't need any more anxiety.

"I'm going into town," I said, as I started to wash the dishes and hand them one by one to Lisa, who was drying.

"How come?"

"Oh, a little business."

"What kind of business?"

"I just want to check out the downtown area."

"For what?"

I laughed. "I'll fill out a written report when I get back."

"I'll go with you."

"Oh no. This is something I have to do alone."

"Detectives usually have partners."

"I think that's just on TV."

"Huh-uh. In *Weekly Reader* last year there was this article on Chicago police and it said that they usually worked in teams. Team means two. You and me, Granddad."

I guessed I really wasn't going to do much more than nose around. Probably wouldn't hurt for her to ride along.

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By the time Emmy got back to the kitchen, looking every bit as happy as I wanted her to be, Lisa and I had finished the dishes and were ready for town.

"When will you be back?"

"Oh, hour or two."

Emmy was suspicious. "Is there something you're not telling me?"

"Nothing, sweetheart," I said, leaning over and kissing her on the cheek. "Honest."

We went out and got in the truck, passing the old cedar chest Lisa had converted into a giant tool box and placed in the back of the pickup. She had fastened it with strong twine so it wouldn't shift around. It looked kind of funny sitting there like that but Lisa had worked hard at it so I wasn't about it take it out.

Twenty years ago there was hope that the Interstate being discussed would run just east of our little town. Unfortunately, it ran north, and twenty miles away. Today the downtown is four two-block streets consisting of dusty red-brick buildings all built before 1930. The post office and the two supermarkets and the five taverns are the busiest places.

I started at the post office, asking for Ev Meader, the man who runs it.

"Gettin' ready for school, Lisa?" Ev said when we came into his office.

She made a face. Ev laughed. "So what can I do for ya today?"

"Wondering if you heard of anybody new moving in around here?" I said. "You know, filling out a new address card."

He scratched his bald head. "Not in the past couple weeks. Least I don't think so. But let me check." He left the office.

I looked down at Lisa. "You going to ask me?"

"Ask you what, Granddad?"

"Ask me how come I'm asking Ev about new people moving into town."

She grinned. "Figured I'd wait till we got back in the truck."

"No new address cards," Ev said when he came back. "I'll keep an eye out for you if you want."

"I'd appreciate it."

In the truck, Lisa said, "Is it all right if I ask you now?"

"I'm wondering if that shot this morning didn't coincide with somebody moving here. Somebody who came here just so they could deal with me."

"You mean, like somebody's after you or something like that?"

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"Uh-huh."

"But who'd be after you?"

"I don't know."

The man at the first hotel had a pot belly and merry red suspenders. "Asian, you say?"

"Right."

"Nope. No Asians that I signed in, anyway."

"How about at night?"

"I can check the book."

"I'd appreciate it."

"Two weeks back be all right?"

"That'd be fine."

But two weeks back revealed no Asians. "Sorry," he said, hooking his thumbs in his suspenders.

"How come Asians?" Lisa said after we were back in the truck.

"Just because of something that happened to me once."

We rode in silence for a time.

"Granddad?"

"Yeah."

"You going to tell me? About what happened to you once?"

"Not right now, hon."

"How come?"

"Too hard for me to talk about." And it was. Every time I thought about it for longer than a minute, I could feel my eyes tear up.

The woman at the second motel wore a black T-shirt with a yellow hawk on it. Beneath it said, "I'll do anything for the Hawkeyes." Anything was underlined. The Hawkeyes were the U of Iowa.

"Couple black guys, some kind of salesmen I guess, but no Asians," she said.

"How about at night?"

She laughed. "Bob works at night. He doesn't much like people who aren't white. We had an Asian guy, I'd hear about it, believe me."

The man at the third motel, a hearty man with a farmer's tan and a cheap pair of false teeth, said, "No Asian."

"Maybe he came at night?"

"The boy, he works the night shift. Those robberies we had a few months back—that convenience store where that girl got shot?—ever since, he keeps a sharp eye out. Usually tells me all about the guests. He didn't mention any Asian."

"Thanks."

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"Sure."

"I'll be happy to ask around," he said.

"Cochran, right?"

"Henry Cochran. Right."

"Thanks for your help, Henry."

"You bet."

"You going to tell me yet?" Lisa said when we were in the pickup and headed back to the farm.

"Not yet."

"Am I bugging you, Granddad?"

I smiled at her. "Maybe a little."

"Then I won't ask you anymore."

She leaned over and gave me a kiss on the cheek, after which she settled back on her side of the seat.

"You know what I forgot to do today?" she said after a while.

"What?"

"Tell you I love you."

"Well, I guess you'd better hurry up and do it then."

"I love you, Granddad."

The funny thing was, I'd never been able to cry much till the cancer, which was a few years ago when I turned fifty-two. Not even when my two best soldier friends got killed in Nam did I cry. Not even when my wife left me did I cry. But these days all sorts of things made me cry. And not just about sad things, either. Seeing a horse run free could make me cry; and certain old songs; and my granddaughter's face when she was telling me she loved me.

"I love you, too, Lisa," I said, and gave her hand a squeeze.

That afternoon Lisa and I spent three hours raking corn in a wagon next to the silo, stopping only when the milk truck came. As usual Ken, the driver, took a sample out of the cooling vat where the milk had been stored. He wanted to get a reading on the butterfat content of the milk. When the truck was just rolling brown dust on the distant road, Lisa and I went back to raking the corn. At five we knocked off. Lisa rode her bike down the road to the creek where she was trying to catch a milk snake for her science class this fall.

I was scrubbing up for dinner when Emmy called me to the phone. "There's a woman on the line for you, Dad. She's got some kind of accent."

"I'll take it in the TV room," I said.

"This is Mr. Wilson?"

"Yes."

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"Mr. Wilson, my name is Nguyn Mai. I am from Viet Nam here visiting."

"I see."

"I would like to meet you tonight. I am staying in Iowa City but I would meet you at the Fireplace restaurant. You know where is?"

"Yes, the Fireplace is downtown here."

"Yes. Would seven o'clock be reasonable for you?"

"I have to say eight. There's a meeting I need to go to first."

"I would appreciate it, Mr. Wilson."

She sounded intelligent and probably middle-aged. I got no sense of her mood.

"Eight o'clock," I said.

After dinner, I took a shower and climbed into a newly washed pair of chinos and a white button-down shirt and a blue windbreaker.

In town, I parked in the Elks lot. Across the cinder alley was the meeting room we used for our support group.

The hour went quickly. There was a new woman there tonight, shy and fresh with fear after her recent operation for breast cancer. At one point, telling us how she was sometimes scared to sleep, she started crying. She was sitting next to me so I put my arm around her and held her till she felt all right again. That was another thing I'd never been too good at till the cancer, showing tenderness.

There were seven of us tonight. We described our respective weeks since the last meeting, exchanged a few low-fat recipes, and listened to one of the men discuss some of the problems he was having with his chemotherapy treatments. We finished off with prayer and then everybody else headed for the coffeepot and the low-fat kolaches one of the women had baked especially for this meeting.

At eight I walked through the door of the Fireplace and got my first look at Nguyn Mai. She was small and fiftyish and pretty in the way of her people. She wore an American dress, dark and simple, a white sweater draped over her shoulders. Her eyes were friendly and sad.

After I ordered my coffee, she said, "I'm sorry I must trouble you, Mr. Wilson."

"Robert is what most people call me."

"Robert then." She paused, looked down, looked up again. "My brother Nguyn Dang plans to kill you."

I told her about the rifle shot this morning, and the envelope later.

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"He was never the same," she said, "after it happened. I am his oldest sister. There was one sister younger, Hong. This is the one who died. She was six years old. Dang, who was twelve at the time, took care of the funeral all by himself, would not even let my parents see her until after he had put her in her casket. Dang always believed in the old religious ways. He buried Hong in our backyard, according to ancient custom. The old ways teach that the head of a virgin girl is very valuable and can be used as a very powerful talisman to bring luck to the family members. Dang was certainly lucky. When he was fourteen, he left our home and went to Saigon. Within ten years, he was a millionaire. He deals in imports. He spent his fortune tracking you down. It was not easy."

"Were you there that day?"

"Yes."

"Did you see what happened?"

She nodded.

"I didn't kill her intentionally. If you saw what happened, you know that's the truth."

"The truth is in the mind's eye, Robert. In my eye, I know you were frightened by a Cong soldier at the other end of our backyard. You turned and fired and accidentally shot Hong. But this is not what my brother saw."

"He saw me kill her in cold blood."

"Yes."

"But why would I shoot a little girl?"

"It was done, you know, by both sides. Maybe not by you but by others."

"And so now he's here."

"To kill you."

During my second cup of coffee, she said, "I am afraid for him. I do not wish to see you killed, but even more I do not wish to see my brother killed. I know that is selfish but those are my feelings."

"I'd have the same feelings." I paused and said, "Do you know where he is?"

"No."

"I looked for him today, after the envelope came."

"And you didn't find him?"

I shook my head. "For what it's worth, Mai, I never forgot what happened that day."

"No?"

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"When I got back to the States, I started having nightmares about it. And very bad migraine headaches. I even went to a psychologist for a year or so. Everybody said I shouldn't feel guilty, that those accidents happen in war. Got so bad, it started to take its toll on my marriage. I wasn't much of a husband—or a father, for that matter—and eventually my wife left me. I'd look around at the other guys I'd served with. They'd done ugly things too, but if it bothered them, they didn't let on. I was even going to go back to Nam and look up your family and tell them I was sorry but my daughter wouldn't let me. At that point, she was ready to put me in a mental hospital. She said that if I seriously tried to go, she'd put me away for sure. I knew she meant it."

"Did you talk to the police today, about his taking a shot at you?"

"You've got to understand something here, Mai. I don't want your brother arrested. I want to find him and talk to him and help him if I can. There hasn't been a day in my life since when I haven't wanted to pick up the phone and talk to your family and tell them how sorry I am."

"If only we could find Dang."

"I'll start looking again tomorrow."

"I feel hopeful for the first time in many years."

I stayed up past midnight because I knew I wouldn't sleep well. There was a Charles Bronson movie on TV, in the course of which he killed four or five people. Before that day in Nam, when I'd been so scared that I'd mistaken a little girl for a VC, I had been all enamored of violence. But no longer. After the war, I gave away all my guns and nearly all my pretensions to machismo. I knew too well where machismo sometimes led.

Ten hours later, coming in from morning chores, I heard the phone ringing. Emmy said it was for me.

It was the motel man with the merry red suspenders. "I heard something you might be interested in."

"Oh?"

"You know where the old Sheldon farm is?"

"I don't think so."

"Well, there's a lime quarry due west of the power station. You know where that would be?"

"I can find it."

"There's a house trailer somewhere back in there. Hippie couple lived there for years but they moved to New Mexico last year. Guy in town who owns a tavern—Shelby, maybe you know him—he bought

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their trailer from them and rents it out sort of like an apartment. Or thought he would, anyway. Hasn't had much luck. Till last week. That's when this Asian guy rented it from him."

The day was ridiculously beautiful, the sweet smoky breath of autumn on the air, the horses in the hills shining the color of saddle leather.

The lime quarry had been closed for years. Some of the equipment had been left behind. Everything was rusted now. The whining wind gave the place the sound of desolation.

I pointed the pickup into the hills where oak and hickory and basswood bloomed, and elm and ash and ironwood leaves caught the bright bouncing beams of the sun.

The trailer was in a grassy valley, buffalo grass knee-deep and waving in the wind, a silver S of creek winding behind the rusted old Airstream.

I pulled off the road in the dusty hills and walked the rest of the way down.

There was a lightning-dead elm thirty yards from the trailer. When I reached it, I got behind it so I could get a better look at the Airstream.

No noise came from the open window, no smoke from the tin chimney.

I went up to the trailer. Every few feet I expected to hear a bullet cracking from a rifle.

The window screens were badly torn, the three steps tilted rightward, and the two propane tanks to the right of the door leaned forward as if they might fall at any moment.

I reached the steps, tried the door. Locked. Dang was gone. Picking the lock encased in the doorknob was no great trouble.

The interior was a mess. Apparently Dang existed on Godfather's pizza. I counted nine different cartons, all grease-stained, on the kitchen counter. The thrumming little refrigerator smelled vaguely unclean. It contained three sixteen-ounce bottles of Pepsi.

In the back, next to the bed on the wobbly nightstand, I found the framed photos of the little girl. She had been quite pretty, solemn and mischievous at the same time.

The photo Dang had sent me was very different. The girl lay on a table, her bloody clothes wrapped around her. Her chest was a dark and massive hole.

I thought I heard a car coming.

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Soon enough I was behind the elm again. But the road was empty. All I'd heard was my own nerves.

During chores two hours later, Lisa said, "You find him?"

"Find who?"

"Find who? Come on, Granddad."

"Yeah, I found him. Or found his trailer, anyway."

"How come you didn't take me with you? I'm supposed to be your partner."

I leaned on my pitchfork. "Hon, from here on out I'll have to handle this alone."

"Oh, darn it, Granddad. I want to help."

There was a sweet afternoon breeze through the barn door, carrying the scents of clover and sunshine.

"All that's going to happen is I'm going to talk to him."

"Gosh, Granddad, he tried to kill you."

"I don't think so."

"But he shot at you."

"He tried to scare me."

"You sure?"

"Pretty sure."

After washing up for the day, I went into the TV room and called Mai and told her that I'd found where her brother was staying.

"You should not go out there," she said. "In my land we say that there are seasons of the heart. The season of my brother's heart is very hot and angry now."

"I just want to talk to him and tell him that I'm sorry. Maybe that will calm him down."

"I will talk to him. You can direct me to this trailer?"

"If you meet me at the restaurant again, I'll lead you out there."

"Then you will go back home?"

"If that's what you want."

She was there right at eight. The full moon, an autumn moon that painted all the pines silver, guided us to the power station and the quarry and finally to the hill above the trailer.

I got out of the car and walked back to hers. "You follow that road straight down."

"Did you see the windows? The lights?"

He was home. Or somebody was.

"I appreciate this, Robert. Perhaps I can reason with my brother."

"I hope so."

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She paused, looked around. "It is so beautiful and peaceful here. You are fortunate to live here."

There were owls and jays in the forest trees, and the fast creek silver in the moonlight, and the distant song of a windmill in the breeze. She was right. I was lucky to live here.

She drove on.

I watched her till she reached the trailer, got out, went to the door, and knocked.

Even from here, I could see that the man-silhouette held a handgun when he opened the door for her. Mai and I had both assumed we could reason with her brother. Maybe not.

"You up for a game of hearts?" Lisa said awhile later.

"Sure," I said.

"Good. Because I'm going to beat you tonight."

"You sure of that?"

"Uh-huh."

As usual I won. I thought of letting her win but then realized that she wouldn't want that. She was too smart and too honorable for that kind of charity.

When she was in her cotton nightie, her mouth cold and spicy from brushing her teeth, she came down and gave me my goodnight kiss.

When Lisa was creaking her way up the stairs, Emmy looked into the TV room and said, "Wondered if I could ask you a question?"

"Sure."

"Are you, uh, all right?"

"Aw, honey. My last tests were fine and I feel great. You've really got to stop worrying."

"I don't mean physically. I mean, you seem preoccupied."

"Everything's fine."

"God, Dad, I love you so much. And I can't help worrying about you."

The full-grown woman in the doorway became my quick little daughter again, rushing to me and sitting on my lap and burying her tear-hot face in my neck so I couldn't see her cry.

We sat that way for a long time and then I started bouncing her on my knee.

She laughed. "I weigh a little more than I used to."

"Not much."

"My bottom's starting to spread a little."

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"Nick seems to like it fine."

With her arms still around me, she kissed me on the cheek and then gave me another hug. A few minutes later, she left to finish up in the kitchen.

The call came ten minutes after I fell into a fitful sleep. I'd been expecting Mai. I got Nick.

"Robert, I wondered if you could come down to the station."

"Now? After midnight?"

"I'm afraid so."

"What's up?"

"A Viet Namese woman came into the Emergency Room over at the hospital tonight. Her arm had been broken. The doc got suspicious and gave me a call. I went over and talked to her. She wouldn't tell me anything at all. Then all of a sudden, she asked if she could see a man named Robert Wilson. You know her, Robert?"

"Yes."

"Who is she?"

"Her name is Nguyn Mai. She's visiting people in the area."

"Which people?"

I hesitated. "Nick, I can't tell you anything more than Mai has."

For the first time in our relationship, Nick sounded cold. "I need you to come down here, Robert. Right away."

Our small town is fortunate enough to have a full-time hospital that doubles as an Emergency Room.

Mai sat at the end of the long hallway, her arm in a white sling. I sat next to her in a yellow form-curved plastic chair.

"What happened?"

"I was foolish," she said. "We argued and I tried to take one of his guns from him. We struggled and I fell into the wall and I heard my arm snap."

"I don't think Nick believes you."

"He says he knows you."

"He goes out with my daughter."

"Is he a prejudiced man, this Nick?"

"I don't think so. He's just a cop who senses that he's not getting the whole story. Plus you made him very curious when you asked him to call me."

"I knew no one else."

"I understand, Mai. I'm just trying to explain Nick's attitude."

Nick showed up a few minutes later.

"How's the arm? Ready for tennis yet?"

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Mai obviously appreciated the way Nick was trying to lighten things up. "Not yet," she said, and smiled like a small shy girl.

"Mind if I borrow your friend a few minutes, Mai?"

She smiled again and shook her head. But there was apprehension in her dark eyes. Would I tell Nick that her brother had taken a shot at me?

In the staff coffee room, I put a lot of sugar and Cremora into my paper cup of coffee. I badly needed to kill the taste.

"You know her in Nam, Robert?"

"No."

"She just showed up?"

"Pretty much."

"Any special reason?"

"Not that I know of."

"Robert, I don't appreciate lies. Especially from my future father-in-law."

"She phoned me last night and we talked. Turns out we knew some of the same people in Nam. That's about all there is to it."

"Right."

"Nick, I can handle this. It doesn't have to involve the law."

"She got her arm broken."

"It was an accident."

"That's what she says."

"She's telling the truth, Nick."

"The same way you're telling the truth, Robert?"

In the hall, Nick said, "She seems like a nice woman."

"She is a nice woman."

When we reached Mai, Nick said, "Robert here tells me you're a nice woman. I'm sorry if my questions upset you."

Mai gave a little half bow of appreciation and goodbye.

In the truck, I turned the heat on. It was two A.M. of a late August night and it was shivering late-October cold.

"Where's your car?"

"The other side of the building," Mai said.

"You'd better not drive back to Iowa City tonight."

"There is a motel?"

After I got her checked in, I pulled the pickup right to her door, number seventeen.

Inside, I got the lights on and turned the thermostat up to eighty so it would warm up fast. The room was small and dark. You could hear the ghosts of it crying down the years, a chorus of smiling

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salesmen and weary vacationers and frantic adulterers.

"I wish I had had better luck with my brother tonight," Mai said. "For everybody's sake."

"Maybe he'll think about it tonight and be more reasonable in the morning."

In the glove compartment I found the old .38 Emmy bought when she moved to the farm. Bucolic as rural Iowa was, it was not without its moments of violence, particularly when drug deals were involved. She kept it in the kitchen cabinet, on the top shelf. I had taken it with me when I left tonight.

In the valley, the trailer was a silhouette outlined in moonsilver. I approached in a crouch, the .38 in my right hand. A white-tailed fawn pranced away to my left, and a raccoon or possum rattled reeds in a long waving patch of bluestem grass.

When I reached the elm, I stopped and listened. No sound whatsoever from the Airstream. The propane tanks stood like sentries.

The doorknob was no more difficult to unlock tonight than it had been earlier.

Tonight the trailer smelled of sleep and wine and rust and cigarette smoke. I stood perfectly still, listening to the refrigerator vibrate. From the rear of the trailer came the sounds of Dang snoring.

When I stood directly above him, I raised the .38 and pushed it to within two inches of his forehead.

I spoke his name in the stillness.

His eyes opened but at first they seemed to see nothing. He seemed to be in a half-waking state.

But then he grunted and something like a sob exploded in his throat and I said, "If I wanted to, I could kill you right now, but I don't want to. I want you to listen to me."

In the chill prairie night, the coffee Dang put on smelled very good. We sat at a small table, each drinking from a different 7-Eleven mug.

He was probably ten years younger than me, slender, with graying hair and a long, intelligent face. He wore good American clothes and good American glasses. Whenever he looked at me directly, his eyes narrowed with anger. He was likely flashing back to the frail bloody dead girl in the photo he'd sent me.

"My sister told you why I came here?"

"Yes."

"You came to talk me out of it, that is why you're here?"

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"Something like that. The first thing is, I want to tell you how sorry I am that it happened."

"Words."

"Pardon?"

"Words. In my land there is a saying, 'Words only delay the inevitable.' If you do not kill me, Mr. Wilson, I will kill you. No matter how many words you speak."

"It was an accident."

"I am a believer in Hoa Hao, Mr. Wilson. We do not believe in accidents. All behavior is willful."

"I willfully murdered a six-year-old girl?"

"In war, there are many atrocities."

Anger came and went in his eyes. When it was gone, he looked old and sad. Rage seemed to give him a kind of fevered youth.

"You were there, Dang. You saw it happen. I wasn't firing at her. I was firing at a VC. She got in the way."

He stared at me a long time. "Words, Mr. Wilson, words."

I wanted to tell him about my years following the killing, how it shaped and in many respects destroyed my life. I even thought of telling him about my cancer and how the disease had taught me so many important lessons. But I would only sound as if I were begging his pity.

I stood up. "Why don't you leave tomorrow? Your sister is worried about you."

"I'll leave after I've killed you."

"What I did, Dang, I know you can't forgive me for. Maybe I'd be the same way you are. But if you kill me, the police will arrest you. And that will kill Mai. You'll have killed her just as I killed your other sister."

For a time, he kept his head down and said nothing. When he raised his eyes to me, I saw that they were wet with tears. "Before I sleep each night, I play in my head her voice, like a tape. Even at six she had a beautiful voice. I play it over and over again."

He surprised me by putting his head down on the table and weeping.

In bed that night, I thought of how long we'd carried our respective burdens, Dang his hatred of me, and me my remorse over Hong's death. I fell asleep thinking of what Dang had said about Hong's voice. I wished I could have heard her sing.

When I got down to the barn in the morning, Lisa was already bottle-feeding the three new calves. I set about the milking operations.

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Half an hour later, the calves, the rabbits, and the barn cats taken care of, Lisa joined me.

"Mom was worried about you."

"Figured she would be," I said. "You didn't tell her anything, did you?"

"No, but Nick did."

"Nick?"

"Uh-huh. He told her about the Viet Namese woman."

"Oh."

"So Mom asked me if I knew anything about it."

"What'd you say?"

"Said I didn't know anything at all. But I felt kinda weird, Granddad, lying to Mom, I mean."

"I'm sorry, sweetheart."

At lunch, bologna sandwiches and creamed corn and an apple, Emmy said, "Dad, could I talk to you?"

"Sure."

"Lisa, why don't you go on ahead with your chores. Granddad'll be down real soon."

Lisa looked at me. I nodded.

When the screen door slapped shut, Emmy said, "Nick thinks you're in some kind of trouble, Dad."

"You know how much I like Nick, honey. I also happen to respect him." I held her hand. "But I'm not in any kind of trouble."

"Who's the Viet Namese woman?"

"Nguyn Mai."

"That doesn't tell me much."

"I don't mean for it to tell you much."

"You getting mad?"

"No. Sad, if anything. Sad that I can't have a life of my own without answering a lot of questions."

"Dad, if Nick wasn't concerned, I wouldn't be concerned. But Nick has good instincts about things like this."

"He does indeed."

"So why not tell us the truth?"

I got up from the table, picked up my dishes, and carried them over to the sink. "Let me think about it a little while, all right?"

She watched me for a long time, looking both wan and a little bit peeved, and finally said, "Think about it a little while, then."

She got up and left the room.

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There were two carts that needed filling with silage. Lisa and I opened the trapdoor in the silo and started digging the silage out. Then we took the first of the carts over and started feeding the cows.

When that was done, I told Lisa to take the rest of the afternoon off. She kept talking about all the school supplies she needed. She'd never find time to get them if she was always working.

During the last rain, we'd noticed a few drops plopping down from the area of the living room. The roof was a good ten years old. I put the ladder against the back of the house and went up and looked around. There were some real bad spots.

I called the lumber store and got some prices on roofing materials. I told them what I wanted. They'd have them ready tomorrow morning.

There was still some work, so after a cup of coffee I headed for the barn. I hadn't quite reached it before the phone rang.

"For you, Dad," Emmy called.

"Robert?"

"I thought maybe you'd be gone by now, Mai. I went out and visited your brother last night. I don't know if he told you about it. I also don't know if it did any good. But at least I got to tell him I was sorry."

"I need to meet you at the hill above his trailer. Right away, please. Something terrible has happened."

"What're you talking about, Mai?"

"Please. The hill. As soon as possible."

"Can you drive?"

"Yes. I drove a little this morning."

"What's happened, Mai?"

"Your granddaughter. Dang has taken her."

As I was grabbing my jacket, and remembering that I'd left the .38 in the glove compartment, Emmy came into the room.

"I need to go out for a little while."

She touched my arm. "Dad, I don't know what just happened but why don't you get Nick to help you?"

I'd thought about that, too. "Maybe I will."

I drove straight and hard to the hill. All the way there I thought of Dang. One granddaughter for one little sister. Even up. I should have thought of that and protected Lisa.

Mai stood by the dusty rental car.

"How do you know she's down there?"

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"An hour ago, I snuck down there and peeked in the window. She is sitting in a chair in the kitchen."

"But she's still alive? You're sure?"

"Yes."

"Did you see if she's bleeding or anything?"

"I don't think he has hurt her. Not yet, anyway."

"I'm going in to get her."

She nodded to the .38 stuffed into my belt. "I am afraid for all of us, now. For Dang and for your granddaughter and for you. And for me."

She fell against me, crying. I was tender as I could be but all I could think of was Lisa.

"I tried to talk him into giving her up. He says that he is only doing the honorable thing." More tears. "Talking won't help, Robert."

I went east, in a wide arc, coming down behind the trailer in a stand of windbreak firs. The back side of the Airstream had only one window. I didn't see anybody watching me.

I bellycrawled from the trees to the front of the trailer. By now, I could hear him shouting in Viet Namese at Lisa. All his anger and all his pain were in those words. The exact meaning made no difference. It was the sounds he made that mattered.

I went to the door and knocked. His words stopped immediately. For a time there was just the soughing silence of the prairie.

"Dang, you let Lisa go and I'll come in and take her place."

"Don't come in, Granddad. He wants to kill you."

"Dang, did you hear me? You let Lisa go and I'll come in. I have a gun now but I'll drop it if you agree."

His first bullet ripped through the glass and screening of the front door.

I pitched left, rolling on the ground to escape the second and third shots.

Lisa yelled at Dang to stop firing, her words echoing inside the trailer.

Prairie silence again; a hawk gliding down the sunbeams.

I scanned the trailer, looking for some way to get closer without getting shot. There wasn't enough room to hide next to the three stairs; nor behind the two silver propane tanks; nor even around the corner. The bedroom window was too high to peek in comfortably.

"He's picking up his rifle, Granddad!" Lisa called.

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Two more shots, these more explosive and taking larger chunks of the front door, burst into the afternoon air. I rolled away from them as best I could.

"Granddad, watch out!"

And then a cry came, one so shrill and aggrieved I wasn't sure what it was at first, and then the front door was thrown open and there was Dang, rifle fire coming in bursts as he came out on the front steps, shooting directly at me.

This time I rolled to the right. He was still sobbing out words in Viet Namese and these had the power to mesmerize me. They spoke exactly of how deep his grief ran.

Another burst of rifle fire, Dang standing on the steps of the trailer and having an easy time finding me with his rifle.

There was a long and curious delay before my brain realized that my chest had been wounded. It was as if all time stopped for a long moment, the universe holding its breath; and then came blood and raging, blinding pain. Then I felt a bone in my arm crack as a bullet smashed into it.

Lisa screamed again. "Granddad!"

As I lay there, another bullet taking my left leg, I realized I had only moments to do what I needed to. Dang was coming down from the steps, moving in to kill me. I raised the .38 and fired.

The explosion was instant and could probably be heard for miles. I'd been forced to shoot at him at an angle. The bullet had missed and torn into one of the propane tanks. The entire trailer had vanished inside tumbling gritty black smoke and fire at least three different shades of red and yellow. The air reeked of propane and the burning trailer.

I called out for Lisa but I knew I could never get to my feet to help her. I was losing consciousness too fast.

And then Dang was standing over me, rifle pointing directly down at my head.

I knew I didn't have long. "Save her, Dang. She's innocent, just the way your sister was. Save her, please. I'm begging you."

The darkness was swift and cold and black, and the sounds of Lisa screaming and fire roaring faded, faded.

The room was small and white and held but one bed and it was mine.

Lisa and Emmy and Nick stood on the left side of the bed while Mai stood on the right.

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"I guess I'll have to do some of your chores for a while, Granddad."

"I guess you will, hon."

"That means driving the tractor."

I looked at Emmy, who said, "We'll hire a couple of hands, sweetheart. No tractor for you until Granddad gets back."

Nick looked at his watch. "How about if I take these two beautiful ladies downstairs for some lunch? This is one of the few hospitals that actually serves good food."

But it wasn't just lunch he was suggesting. He wanted to give Mai a chance to speak with me alone.

Lisa and Emmy kissed me then went downstairs with Nick.

I was already developing stiffness from being in bed so long. After being operated on, I'd slept through the night and into this morning.

Mai leaned over and took my hand. "I'm glad you're all right, Mr. Wilson."

"I'm sorry, Mai. How things turned out."

"In the end, he was honorable man."

"He certainly was, Mai. He certainly was."

After I'd passed out, Dang had rushed back into the trailer and rescued Lisa, who had been remarkably unscathed.

Then Dang had run back inside, knowing he would die in the smoke and the flames.

"Tomorrow would have been our little sister's birthday," Mai said, "I do not think he wanted to face that."

She cried for a long time cradled in my good left arm, my right being in a sling like hers.

"He was not a bad man."

"No, he wasn't, Mai. He was a good man."

"I am sorry for your grief."

"And I'm sorry for yours."

She smiled tearily. "Seasons of the heart, Mr. Wilson. Perhaps the season will change now."

"Perhaps it will," I said, and watched her as she leaned over to kiss me on the forehead.

As she was leaving, I pointed to my arm sling and then to hers. "Twins," I said.

"Yes," she said. "Perhaps we are, Robert."

AUTHOR'S NOTE: For the farm details, I drew on memory and a fine book called *The American Family Farm*, Ancona/Anderson, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989. And thanks to Dr. Robert Drexler for his help with Viet Namese names.

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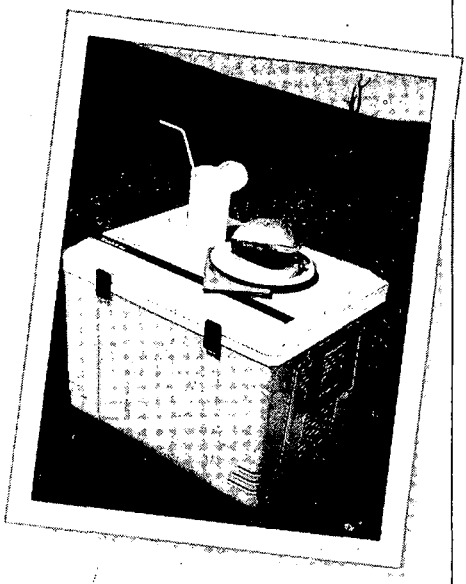

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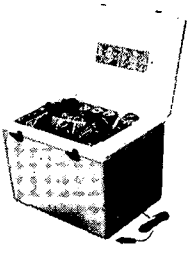

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a *NEW* short story by

SUZANNE JONES

The daughter of an oil-field employee, Suzanne Jones spent a part of her childhood in Arabia and Sumatra before returning to the rocky hill country of north Texas. Many of her stories employ these settings, and other childhood memories play an important role in her fiction too. Of the portrayal of Eva Peron in this new story she writes, "As a child I remember seeing a newsreel of Evita with her blond hair and padded shoulders, listening to the importunings of the poor, and then removing money from a silver box on the desk in front of her. I remember her smiling at the camera graciously as a black-clad old woman scuttled away with her money as though Evita might change her mind. . . ."

GIRL UNDER GLASS

by SUZANNE JONES

I read somewhere that when Eva Peron died the Argentine doctor who embalmed her body became obsessed with it, even concealing the glass-topped coffin with its lovely occupant for a time in the attic of his home. Like some morbid Pygmalion, he had fallen in love with his creation: an effigy of purity he had fashioned out of corruption.

She died young, did Evita, but still beautiful, though ravaged by cancer within, as if the carnal knowledge of the suffering of her country could no longer be contained in her narrow whore's soul but had eaten its corrosive way to the very verges of her flesh.

He had arranged her golden hair just so, and I imagine his gazing rapturously by the hour at that cold face. In life, of course, a passing look from her would have shriveled his bourgeois soul, flaring as it would have like the sun and scattering such shy suitors like so much

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cosmic ash. At the end of her short life she reserved her passion for the poor and doled it out like the pesos which she gave them from a silver box. Their abject devotion to her and her silver box was headier and had become more addictive than the intoxication of mere sexual conquest. No, alive she would have wasted no time on the little doctor who now so obsequiously cared for her. But death and the political uncertainty of the times had unexpectedly delivered her into his hands, and he would loyally attend her for the next twenty years. Her court of one.

The result of his scrupulous devotion to arresting the putrefaction of the corpse later would be cited as evidence of the incorruptibility of her body—a miracle, a visible, credible manifestation of the divine which gave some impetus to the beatification so earnestly desired for her by many of her countrymen. Sainthood, the fruit of one man's necrophilia.

I don't know why Belinda Moore reminded me of Evita, but she did, though she was as dark as Evita was fair. Perhaps it was because she would have wasted as little time on Ben Smith as Evita would have on her doctor, had not a vessel supplying blood to Belinda's brain unexpectedly burst when she was about Evita's age, and in an instant reduced her to a creature who should now be grateful for someone like Ben's attentions. For anyone's attentions.

I am making Ben sound too much like Evita's little doctor when he really was a very attractive man, thin and athletic. A widower. But he was considerably older than Belinda, a civil servant who had invested well and taken early retirement and was certainly not in the mainstream of her earlier choices. There are photographs of those in the albums that I would sometimes see her crying over: bronzed, smiling, beautiful men, fit companions for someone like the person Belinda used to be.

Belinda Moore two years ago was everything I ever wanted to be, which is not something one encounters very often. Usually there is some flaw in those whom we admire, some part of the total package that one would rather do without than completely surrender one's sense of self to become, but it wasn't true of Belinda. Oh, undoubtedly she was arrogant then, since she was arrogant when I knew her, but could one honestly say that with her beauty, grace, and accomplishments, one would not have become a little arrogant?

I didn't know her before her stroke, but I have seen her pictures: Belinda five hundred feet up on the buttress at Hallet's Peak, Belinda in her kayak on the North Fork of the Salmon, on skis at Vail,

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drying her long black hair beside her diving gear at Belize. And of course those men. Adoring, athletic, looking at the camera with high spirits, good humor, and wonder.

Even her voice was good. I could tell, though the words now came out slurred and halting as her damaged brain struggled with the pattern of speech. In its pitch and timbre it was as good as mine, and I have been told that I have an exceptional voice.

Even the ruin Belinda had become was a lovely one. The evil fairy who had come to weaken that blood vessel in the night could not destroy those cheekbones, those brows like raven's wings, and the dark eyes beneath them. Her skin I suppose was as silky as it ever was, her figure as slender. But in a single moment she had been reduced to paralysis and incoherence, all her grace gone in an instant. Though she had many lovers, she had not as many friends, and it was several days before they found her lying in her bed in her own waste.

Her parents rushed to the aid of their only child. There were operations and hospitals and therapy, and their considerable efforts were not entirely in vain. Belinda was restored to the extent that she could walk with the aid of a brace and a crutch and dress and feed herself. But it was feared that there might be other blood vessels awaiting their chance to betray her, and so they hired a woman to stay with her and help care for her. Then another, then another. I was the next in a long line of such women who had, for one reason or another, not proved satisfactory. None had stayed longer than a month, so when I passed that milestone it was a great relief to Belinda's mother, with whom I was in weekly contact. Belinda found it far more difficult to communicate over the telephone than in person, so it fell to me to keep her parents informed of her progress. And there was some. It was very slow, but she went to therapy five days a week and gradually seemed to be gaining more control over her own body.

"Little triumphs," Belinda called them, her mouth twisting around the difficult words.

Though she might have appeared retarded to the casual observer, she was not. Her mind was as acute as ever, her mother had assured me, but Belinda had to struggle to extract the words stuck in the bruised and swollen part of her brain.

She had been a management consultant, very successful if one can judge by the glossy folders advertising her expertise, which now were relegated to the albums along with the rest of her past. With

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her earnings she had purchased several houses in the Boulder area, but those properties were managed by someone else. I had only to do the cooking and the laundry and keep the house. I had my own room and my own time when Belinda was in therapy, or resting in the afternoon, though I dared not leave her for more than a few hours. I also had a generous allowance from Belinda's parents. When I wondered that Belinda did not return to San Francisco to live with them, her mother said that Belinda wanted her independence. She wanted to remain in Boulder. With her friends.

Not that I saw much evidence of them. I guess it is too hard on most people to try to understand someone like Belinda and cope with her frustration and rage when they cannot.

We got along well enough because she mostly ignored me except for the communication inherent in ordinary living, which wasn't difficult for me to understand. She was barely cordial, I suppose because I was just hired help. Any kindness or consideration I showed her she must have felt was paid for. The only affection I saw her bestow on anyone, including her parents, was on the cat they had gotten her shortly after she had come home from the hospital. She would stroke its gray striped fur by the hour. I thought she should name it, but she never did.

I had just come to Boulder from Texas a month after my father died, so I was pleased to find a suitable situation so soon, since the only skills I possessed were not very marketable ones. Fortunately my experience was exactly that which Belinda now required. For almost twenty years I had looked after Daddy, cleaning his house, cooking his meals, bathing him. In many ways Belinda was much easier to deal with.

After Daddy's funeral I came to Boulder because it was the place I had been happiest. I was in my freshman year at the University of Colorado when Daddy had the first of the series of strokes which made him dependent on me. I came home at once. He was not expected to live, but he did, eventually outliving all of his money and most of his family and friends.

Anyway, back to Boulder I had come some twenty years later, answered an ad in the newspaper, interviewed with Belinda's parents, and moved into Belinda's house the next day. Her parents returned to their home in California and promised to keep in touch.

Though the next few weeks were not without their difficulties, eventually we settled into a routine which allowed me some time of my own. I was able for example to sign up for an anthropology class

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which met one night a week at the extension center, though I had selected the course more on its compatibility with my schedule than interest.

There is a comfort in routine. I had my schoolwork, and, as I said, Belinda was making slow progress. Perhaps as she got better, and required less of my time, I could increase the number of hours I was carrying. I could work toward a degree in spite of my age. It was something I had often thought about. It was something to look forward to.

Then one day she announced she was going out on a date.

As best I could make out, Belinda had met Ben at the hospital at therapy. She rode the bus there by herself. She couldn't manage a car yet, and although I could take her, her doctors recommended that she take the bus. It was necessary, according to Belinda's mother, to try to build, or rather rebuild, a sense of self-reliance and accomplishment.

Ben had fallen off his bicycle at the end of the summer and wrecked a knee. The physical therapist introduced them.

I am not without knowledge of the world. I read. One cannot pick up a newspaper or see television without being reminded that there are men in this world who would take advantage of someone like Belinda, who was so very vulnerable. I mentioned this to Belinda, who only raised her chin and gave me the look of disdain with which I was too familiar. So I called her mother, who spoke with Belinda's doctor. To my surprise, they both agreed that Belinda's interest in this man was natural and part of the recovery process.

So Belinda began to go out with Ben. She didn't talk much about him, but they went to dinner fairly regularly, went to a football game and some of the other university activities, lectures and so forth.

I met him and that did much to reduce the anxiety I felt. I was surprised that he was so much older than Belinda. He must have been five or six years older than myself. He took my hand and was very pleasant to me. He said he and Belinda had a great deal in common. He now did a lot of hiking, but in his youth had done high-angle rock climbing, run rivers, that sort of thing. He had just taken up diving in the past couple of years. He seemed quite taken with Belinda. Or perhaps with the person she used to be.

Ben had been in our lives almost a month when Belinda had to undergo additional surgery. Her doctors feared that without it another stroke was inevitable. So she flew to California. The surgery

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would be performed at the Stanford Medical Center. How long she would be hospitalized was a matter of conjecture.

I was alone again in a house for the first time since Daddy died. The next day I vacuumed as usual and prepared meals for myself, did the laundry, and fed the cat, but I was aware of a difference in the house, which was not just due to Belinda's absence. It was a tangible, physical sensation like a heavy current of cool air sliding slowly over the polished floors and down hallways to swirl about my body. Like a window or a door had been left open, but I checked, and none had. It was disturbing, but also strangely exciting, as if something of great importance was happening or about to happen.

I caught sight of myself in the hall mirror and was surprised that I still looked the same. Unchanged, despite my anticipation. I drew nearer to my image. Short dark hair. Small brown eyes set in a moon face with a smattering of freckles. Perhaps if I used the face cream Belinda used every morning and night, I too could have that flawless skin.

I decided that it was wasteful to continue to cook just for myself while Belinda was gone. If I took my meals at the grill on campus, perhaps I could lose some of that extra weight which had crept up on me over the years. The food wasn't very good, but it was cheap, and a salad is a salad. I thought I might try to walk over and back, though the walk is a long one. If I made it daily, the exercise had to do me some good.

Belinda's mother called after the surgery. The doctors considered it a great success, although Belinda had not yet regained consciousness.

Ben called, and I dutifully relayed the message. His voice on the telephone was deep and rich. He told me he was thinking of visiting some friends in California, and he might get by to see Belinda at Stanford. I told him that at this point it would be a waste of his time since she remained in a coma. I took his number and promised to call him if there was any change.

More than a week had passed when Belinda's mother called with discouraging news. On regaining consciousness, Belinda had gone into convulsions. The doctors had immediately put her under again. It would take more time to stabilize her before they could bring her to a state of wakefulness.

Ben seemed depressed by the news. He continued to call at least once a week, sometimes more. He was getting ready for a diving trip to Cozumel. He and Belinda had talked of her going with him

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after she got out of the hospital. Now that was uncertain.

And probably impossible.

I got an A on my first exam and by then had lost seven pounds. I found an aerobic show on television to exercise to early every morning and lost three more. When I told Ben of my progress, he seemed very pleased for me. He said as long as I was getting in shape, maybe I'd like to come for a walk with him.

Fall in Boulder is my favorite time on earth even though it was only my second fall here. To me it is a season of excitement and promise, of learning, and of urgencies that I find pleasurable.

"Like gathering bits of string and twigs," Ben teased.

He meant not nest building in the spring but that primitive urge in the fall to create shelter for ourselves against the harshness of the coming winter, an urge as natural as the large silver-leaf maple trees on campus turning yellow and the ivy on the stone walls turning red, when the air is as cool and as heady as wine. Even so, it meant more to me than that. I felt as I had so many years ago in that other fall in Boulder: I was poised on the edge of wonderful possibilities.

Ben was very patient with me on our hike up Gregory Canyon, making me go slowly but steadily up the trail. It was a warm, golden day, but the air seemed so thin to me that I had trouble breathing. And the steep, rocky trail seemed to go on forever. I had tears of pain and frustration by the time we reached the top of the canyon. I threw myself down on the floor of the forest and looked back through the trees down at Boulder, which lay so impossibly far below, and the eastern plains disappearing in a silvery-white line against the deep blue sky. My heart was pounding against my ribs, but as it slowed and I could breathe again, I was proud that Ben had made me go all the way to the top. He said it would get easier the more weight I lost. And going up was the hard part. When we started back, however, I found it almost as difficult to go down that steep trail as up. I kept slipping on the small rocks on the trail bed. Ben showed me how to keep my balance by keeping my weight over my feet and forward instead of back on my heels. "Just as though you were skiing," he said. As though I ever had.

Belinda's mother called to say that Belinda's eyes were open and she thought that Belinda recognized her. The doctors were hopeful that they could control the convulsions with a change of medication. It had been more than a month since Belinda had gone to California.

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Ben stopped by often, and we would go into Boulder's mountain parks for hikes—he called them walks—during that splendid Indian summer. He was right. I did gradually get better at hiking the more weight I lost. The looseness of my clothes made me look sloppier than ever, so I bought some new things, mostly pants, and as inexpensively as I could. Since I intended to lose more weight, I hated to squander the money on things I would shortly have to discard.

Ben too was very careful with his money and rarely spent it on himself except for his diving trips and travel. He liked to travel, he said, but often found it difficult to find someone to travel with him. Most of the girls he knew still worked, and either didn't have the time or—if they didn't work—the money. Except for Belinda, of course.

Belinda was still in the hospital when Ben went to Cozumel on his diving trip.

I ran out of the face cream Belinda used and had to replace it, though I was shocked at its expense. The woman I bought it from had some very helpful suggestions to improve my appearance. (She called it "my beauty.") I followed her instructions as best I could because I liked the way I looked with a little makeup. My eyes looked larger. Of course my face being so much thinner made them look larger anyway.

Ben brought over his pictures from Cozumel, and they were very interesting. Underwater photography is one of his hobbies. So many brightly colored fish. So clear the water.

Ben had made a tape, a narration of his diving trip which he asked me to send to Belinda. He thought she could listen to it in the hospital and look at the pictures of the fish. After he had gone, I sat for a long time on Belinda's couch in Belinda's living room. I was wearing one of her sweaters, the caramel-colored one that goes so well with my eyes. I sat with the pictures and the tape in my lap. The pictures of the fish were so clear they looked like they had been taken behind aquarium glass. But there was all that water above them, pressing down on them. And things that swam in the dark. I was a little afraid of the sea.

I don't think I made a conscious decision not to send the pictures and the tape. Certainly not at that time. It was just that I had a paper due for class, and I think I put off the trip to the post office until I could get it finished. Then there was the final exam to study for. Always there was something else. I had forgotten all about it until Ben asked if Belinda had played the tape yet. I said, "Not yet,"

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embarrassed that I had failed to mail the package.

Several times I thought of it, but there was always something else that seemed to require my attention.

Belinda was getting better. The ragged edge in her mother's voice was gone, and she sounded more like her old, optimistic self. Belinda was sitting up and able to talk a little. It would be awhile before her condition improved to where it had been before the operation, but she was anxious to leave the hospital and return to Colorado.

I spent Christmas day with Ben. It had snowed a few days before, and it was the first real, heavy snowfall that I had ever seen. In my part of Texas, winter means a season of sleet and black ice. The snow in Boulder had swirled down streets and over houses and lawns and transformed even the homeliest lots into satiny landscapes. My first real snow might have been late in coming, but it was a lovely one. We walked to the open-air mall downtown, enjoying the stillness of the streets after the bustle of the holiday crowds, and the fine, cold weather. He gave me a wooden fish he had bought in Cozumel. I gave him a glass dolphin which seemed to please him very much.

I caught sight of us in the reflection of a shop window: the tall, distinguished-looking man, the smiling, dark-eyed woman. And even though we were both bundled up against the cold—I was wearing one of Belinda's ski parkas—how attractive I looked, and how nice we looked together.

He was puzzled and a little hurt that Belinda's parents hadn't yet played the tape he had made for her. While talking with Belinda himself was out of the question, he said he had half a mind to call her parents. He had not done so before because he felt he would be intruding. Presumptuous, even. He hadn't known Belinda all that long before her surgery, though she was very dear to him.

"I don't even know how she feels about me," he said sadly. "I can't understand her."

And how dear was I to him? I suppose it was a measure of how confident I had become that I could dare to ask such a question.

"Oh, you," he said, throwing an arm about my shoulders and squeezing me to him. "Yes," he said, chuckling, "you're also very dear."

With that I was content and very happy. It was the best Christmas I could remember. The best since Mama died, and that had been years and years ago.

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Happiness is such a fragile thing. Though I knew that it is as ephemeral as a snowflake, I had no means of preserving or protecting mine. When Belinda came home, as she surely would, it seemed that it must end. We would resume our routine, Belinda and I, and go back to the way things were. There would be no time to do my exercises. No time to spend with Ben. When I let myself think of it, I found it as difficult to breathe as on that first hike with Ben up Gregory Canyon.

Had Belinda let her mother call me, it might never have happened. I would have taken the few clothes I had borrowed from Belinda's closet to the cleaners. I would have gotten the house ready for her. I had let it go a little during registration for the upcoming semester. I had been distracted in selecting and signing up for the courses I planned to take, and Ben had taken up much of my time, since we saw each other almost every day.

But her mother had not called me. No one had called me, and suddenly there Belinda was, paying off the taxi in front of the house, more inarticulate than ever in her fury with me. I don't know if it was the sight of the person I had become or recognizing the sweater I had on that goaded her into such a frenzy. Still she had only herself to blame for surprising me like that.

She ignored the cat, which crept out to greet her in the front hall. She grabbed the collar of the sweater I was wearing and tried to rip it off me. I jerked away.

"You . . . bitch!" she cried and stepped forward, panting. "You never . . . " spit sprayed my face " . . . sent tape!"

So that was it. Ben, in his puzzlement, *had* called her parents. She was right. I had never sent the tape.

She thrust out her chin. "Just wait. I tell—" she groped for the word she wanted, but her malevolent gaze never left my face. "Use my . . . things. Ben. Fat . . . pig! Fired!"

I put my hand against that outthrust chin and pushed as hard as I could. The cat tried to get out from under her feet, but she tripped over it and fell backwards, her crutch flailing the air. Her head hit the entry tiles with a thud that a ripe melon might make.

I stood over her, trying to catch my breath. The cat recovered from its fright and began cautiously to sniff Belinda's ear. Belinda's eyes did not leave the ceiling.

"You should have given me a chance to explain," I began when I realized that she couldn't hear me. Was not in fact likely to hear anything or anyone ever again.

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I was physically ill, then I called an ambulance.

She wasn't dead, but the damage to her brain was so massive that she never regained consciousness. She was transported back to California where she lived for a few weeks before her parents reluctantly had life support withdrawn.

"It's not your fault," Ben said again with his arm around me. "She tripped over the cat. You mustn't blame yourself."

He told me that he had called her parents, but he couldn't understand why—according to her mother—Belinda had become so upset over the missing tape. So I had mislaid it. He would have made Belinda another copy. I think it has never occurred to him that my failure to send the tape might have been deliberate.

Had Belinda suspected in the intervals between her long sleeps that Ben might have become interested in me? I think not. She had so little regard for me that I think it was more a matter of being somehow thwarted. Frustrated. Ben had intended the tape for Belinda, and she had never gotten it. But it had made her suspicious of me, so much so that she had come back unannounced, intending to surprise me in whatever nefarious activities I might have been engaged. I don't think it would ever have occurred to her to be jealous of me.

And as it turns out, on our honeymoon Ben confided to me that he would never have married Belinda regardless of how fond he might have become of her. He had worked too long and too hard to harness himself to another sick wife. I was a little disturbed at that. I don't know why. He's been more than kind to me except that he had me withdraw from school before the semester even started. He wants to teach me to dive and take some diving trips with me this spring. There simply won't be time for me to go to school, he tells me, and it's a waste of money anyhow. At my age what possible use could I make of a degree? Besides, he says that we need to save his money since it may be needed in the long run to take care of him. Of both of us. He is getting on in years, though of course his health is still very good.

I tried to tell him I'm afraid of water, afraid of the sea, but he says that's something I'll get over. Besides, he can hardly wait to see me in a bathing suit. I'll look so fine. In fact, if he could just get me to let my hair grow long, I'd even put our friend Belinda to shame.

Belinda, who reminds me of Evita. ●

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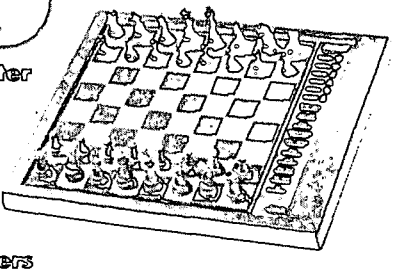

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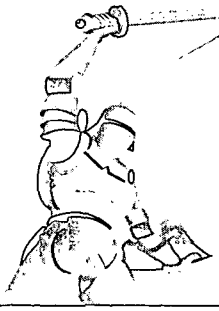

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a *NEW* short story by

JAMES POWELL

The private detectives we are most familiar with in the work of James Powell come from the Ganelon family, several generations of which have plied their trade in the author's imaginary principality of San Sebastiano. This time he gives us a P.I. closer to the hard-boiled style but still as zany as any of his comic characters . . .

THE BLACK DAFFODIL

by JAMES POWELL

The ancient elevator, a cage of iron vines and tendrils, rose in the open shaft, clanking and clashing like a knight in cheap armor. Harry Grundig didn't mind. At his age he felt affection for old contraptions that kept on working. Right now his own big worry was all this talk about annual recertification for private investigators over the age of seventy. Oh, he could handle the written exam. But he wasn't all that steady on his pins anymore. In the old days he'd punched his way out of many a tight corner. But that was then and this was now.

As the elevator plodded upward its jungle of light and shadow crept down the hallways and up and across the doors of dark offices. Grundig stuffed the bottle of Old Pretender in the paper bag into an overcoat pocket and brushed the melting sleet from his sleeves and shoulders. Then he looked down at his knuckles. In Aardvark Investigations' prime that skin never got a chance to heal. Now it was smooth as a baby's bottom. Now he slept on a pull-out sofa in his daughter and son-in-law's living room out in the suburbs. And one night a month, when the Social-Security check arrived, he'd get together with Biff O'Malley, who at eighty-two was the dean of

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private eyes, to drink cheap scotch and kick the gong around. If things went as usual Grundig would end up sleeping it off on the leather couch in Biff's outer office and then go home in the morning to play the dutiful old grandfather for another month.

Above him more cheap armor clashed as the other elevator cage started down the shaft. As the descending cage passed him Grundig was surprised to find it was running with its overhead light off. Just before it dropped from sight he made out the figure of a tall slight passenger in the dark cage and thought he smelled face powder.

Grundig was still scratching his jaw over that one as he followed the hallway to the office marked O.S.S. with an eye painted inside the O. O'Malley Security and Surveillance. The inner door was open. He rapped on the jamb. "Hey, Biff!" he called and stepped inside.

O'Malley lay behind his desk with the hole from a .38 slug in his chest. "Holy hell!" muttered Grundig. As he bent over the body O'Malley's eyes sprang open. He grabbed Grundig's overcoat in one hand and raised the other to his ear as if it held a telephone. "The Black Daffodil," gasped O'Malley. His grip on Grundig's overcoat tightened urgently. "The Black Daffodil." Then he fell back dead.

An hour later Grundig was heading back down to the lobby. He'd told the police everything, from the dark elevator to the dead man's last words. The police acted like O'Malley's murder was no big deal, like when you're eighty-two you're almost dead anyway. When they offered to have a patrol car drive him home, Grundig refused. He wasn't a helpless old man. By God, if they weren't going to bring O'Malley's murderer to justice then he damn well would!

There in the elevator Grundig broke the seal on the bottle of Old Pretender and drank a farewell toast to his dead friend. When that was done, he squared his shoulders. He needed answers to a couple of questions. For starters he'd better check in with Manny Capabianco.

The Hotel Villamar was a fleabag on a dead end off Sutton, its name a bad neon stutter between the fourth-floor windows and the roof overhang. The lobby could have been the legendary valley where squarish overstuffed chairs of the art deco herd came to die.

A television set grumbled behind the curtained doorway in back of the registration desk. Grundig hit the slap bell on the counter. The curtain parted and there was Manny Capabianco in gray cardigan and old slippers, crooked smile and all, the eternal cigarette between his lips. Capabianco had been the best private eye

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around, a guy with all the right moves, quick with his mitts and a big hit with the ladies. But when he turned forty and saw old age come roaring down on him like a devouring lion, Manny Capabianco lost his nerve. So he married Sweetheart, his receptionist, who was due to inherit the Villamar.

Manny was balding now, his famous sun-lamp tan shattered into liver spots, his head slightly shrunken, like they'd taken out more teeth than they'd given back in dentures. "How goes it, Aardvark?" he asked in a voice rough as cheap cigarette tobacco. (It had been a mistake to call himself Aardvark Investigations to get listed first in the phone book. The boys had never let him live it down.)

Instead of the usual report on his gouty foot or his prostate, tonight Grundig got to say, "Somebody just shot Biff O'Malley dead."

Manny took the cigarette from his mouth. "Tell me more," he ordered quietly. Cigarette smoke figured large in Manny's routine. He handled it like a card sharp with a deck, gathering it in, shuffling it, and dealing it back out again. And peering at you over the top of it like he held all the aces.

First Grundig brought out the Old Pretender.

With a furtive glance at the curtain, Manny made two glasses appear from out of nowhere. "Here's looking at Biff O'Malley," he said as they clinked glasses. Then he listened to Grundig's story. At the end Manny shook his head. "The Black Daffodil part must have been before I moved here." But then his eyes brightened. "Say, don't I remember something about this rare flower bulb, a black one, that's worth a real bundle to the Dutch. So somebody's got it and a lot more are after it. Say O'Malley gets this phone call. Yeah! The Black Daffodil's just arrived on a freighter." The light fled Manny's eyes. He shook his head again. "Nah, I must've dreamed it." He poured himself another drink. "What kind of cop's this Lieutenant Norbert, the one in charge of the investigation?" Back in their day cops only came in one flavor, clothes off-the-rack with heavy shoes. Today they came in two, expensive tailored suits with Guccis and ponytails and stubble with Guccis.

"She's a blonde."

Both men grew smaller in the glum silence that followed. After a while Manny asked wistfully, "Remember the Roscoe and Fedora Club?"

How could Grundig forget? The P.I.'s used to talk about clubbing together to turn an old brownstone into a place to drink and talk. No dames allowed. And rooms upstairs where old-timers could live

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out their days. The Roscoe and Fedora Club, the old Gat and Hat. Grundig gave the memory a wistful smile. Then he said, "Let's get down to business. You saw Biff more than I did. Was he working on something?"

"You mean like a job? Nah, you know how it is. Electronic whiz kids get all the work."

A woman's voice shouted through the curtain, "Manny, whoever it is, tell 'em we're all full up. There ain't no room at the inn."

"Hear that, Aardvark?" murmured Manny. "Even the Devil can quote Scripture." Then he downed his drink, smiled with his teeth together, and called out, "Don't get your shirt in a knot, Sweetheart." To Grundig he said, "Hey, here's something. Last night we took Biff to the fights. Sweetheart likes to remind her old beaus in the business what they missed out on when they let her get away. Anyway, after the prelims, in troops the uptown crowd, talking all their loud ladidah. And, damn, didn't a live one sit down behind me. I thought his knees were going right through my back. So I cocked the old fish-eye and turned around. Here's this big baby-faced kid, maybe twenty-five, with muscles on his muscles and a suit that fit like a glove. He's talking to somebody's rich Aunt Fanny. But he sees my fish-eye and raises me one Mad Dog Timmins smile. Remember Mad Dog, Aardvark?"

"The Dunstan Triptych." Grundig named Manny's most famous case wearily, having heard the story and seen the movie (he was a sucker for John Garfield flicks) too many times. Besides, the fancy trade like the Dunstans never seemed to come Grundig's way.

"Yes, sir," smiled Manny, "there I am on a dark and stormy night out at the construction site, unarmed and with the ransom money as per instructions. But Dunstan's beautiful daughter has set me up. In walks Mad Dog, all three hundred pounds of brawn, fresh from the dinner table with this white napkin still stuck under his chin, smiling like he's wanted me for dessert for a long, long time. Mad Dog crowds right up to me, so close I smell the boeuf bordelaise on his breath. When I hit the circuit breaker on the wall behind me Mad Dog turned three kinds of blue and lit up like a Christmas tree. Then he went real crisp. The moral of the story is, never share a puddle with a live wire. Anyway, it put me off bacon for a week."

Manny did a standing swagger and slammed his fist on the counter. "I was good, damn good, Aardvark!"

"Let's get back to the fights and Baby Face."

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Manny gave him a dark look. Then he shrugged. "So Baby Face gives me a Mad Dog smile, okay? So I swallow the fish-eye and turn back around, okay?" Manny lit another cigarette and exhaled. "What's important is I notice that old Biff has this distracted look all through the main event. You know, like something's got him real puzzled. And he kept glancing over his shoulder in Baby Face's direction. Later in the car I asked him about it. All he'd say was that his memory was playing tricks on him. Maybe. But all the way back to Biff's place I had this feeling like the good old days, like we were being tailed."

"A two-tone Rolls?"

Manny pounded the desk joyfully. "Damn, and I thought it was just wishful thinking."

"It followed me here right now."

Manny couldn't hide his envy. "You're on to something. Yes, you are, you lucky mutt!" He dealt Grundig a congratulatory punch on the biceps. "Well, let's go! What the hell are we hanging around here for?" Manny started to finish his drink.

"I bet Books Bascom can put us wise on the Black Daffodil part," said Grundig. "If we can find him."

Bascom's name set Manny off on a big coughing fit. When he could he growled, "Time to switch to filters."

"Manny," came the voice again, "get the hell in here. You got to put the ashes out."

"Coming, Sweetheart." Manny's tone was more agreeable now. To Grundig he said, "Sorry, Aardvark. Maybe next time. I better stay. She gets nervous here by herself. You know how it is."

Grundig nodded and secured the cap on the bottle.

Manny said, "Behind Allied Appliances there are these four Frig-id-Queen refrigerator-freezer combination packing boxes. Books is in the one marked 'Avocado.' "

The sleet had turned to a windy rain that set the scarf Grundig's daughter had knitted for him flapping around his neck. Grundig let it flap. Private detectives working on cases never tuck in their scarves no matter what their daughters order. Grundig turned the corner onto Sutton with a quick, purposeful stride. The spill from an open downspout had formed a scab of wet ice across the sidewalk. When he hit the spot his feet started out from under him. In one fearful second he knew he was going to fall. In the next he found his balance. Then he lost it again.

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Nearby a young bruiser in a well-tailored overcoat was leaning back against a two-tone Rolls parked under a streetlight. He watched as Grundig struggled with windmill arms and rag-doll knees to keep his footing. After a bit Baby Face—it had to be him—strolled over for a closer look.

Grundig's hopes rose when two couples emerged from a building farther down the street and headed toward him talking loudly. But then Baby Face started whistling "Sweet Georgia Brown" and clapping his gloved hands in time to the music. The couples passed by, thinking Grundig was dancing for quarters.

Grundig danced on. Whenever it looked like he was winning his struggle for balance Baby Face gave him a quick poke with his finger to set him slipping and sliding again. Grundig sweated and scrambled to keep his feet, his body bucked forward and back, his arms flew every way. He knew he mustn't fall.

Baby Face seemed to read his mind. "Want a broken hip, old man?" he asked.

"No," puffed Grundig earnestly.

"Say again?" said the young man.

"No," said Grundig, as his legs went out from under him. "Please."

Baby Face grabbed the front of Grundig's overcoat and lifted the old man off his feet. When they were nose to nose he said, "You the guy who called the cops?" Hanging there by the armpits in the sling of his own overcoat, Grundig nodded. "Friend of the deceased, right?" Baby Face considered Grundig's second nod before lowering him until his shoes touched the ice. Then he steadied the old man like something that had to be placed just so. Stepping back to admire his work, he said, "Tell me all about it."

Knees wobbling, Grundig started talking as fast as he could, telling Baby Face everything he'd told the police. When he was done Baby Face kept him teetering there.

"When you come right down to it, what's so important about an old guy getting shot, right?"

"Right." Grundig's voice was hoarse.

"So your little investigation ends right here?"

"Right here."

"Good." Baby Face was solicitude itself as he put a hand under Grundig's elbow and helped him over to the safety of the streetlight. "Go home, old man," he said, tucking Grundig's scarf into his overcoat. "This weather can be bad for your health. Especially if I run into you again." Baby Face feigned a lunge with his finger, making

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Grundig jump and hug the streetlight. The young man laughed, walked back to the Rolls, and drove away.

Grundig cooled his cheek against the cast iron of the streetlight, waiting for the pound of his heart to slow and the starch to seep back into his knees. He felt very tired and very old. But his mind kept wandering back to something odd about the .38 he'd seen protruding from his tormentor's overcoat pocket. Why had it been in a plastic bag?

Why not? Who cares? The case was closed. Go home, old man, he scolded himself. Go watch some television.

Grundig started slowly down the street with a hand on the storefronts to help himself along. After several blocks walking like this he found himself in front of Allied Appliances. Feeling a real need to tell his troubles to an old friend, he worked his way around to the back of the store. Off to one side of the loading dock beneath an old tarpaulin were four packing boxes. He passed "Burnt Orange," "Nutmeg," and "Eggplant." When he reached the one marked "Avocado" he kicked on it gently with his foot and announced himself in a loud whisper.

"Welcome to the wigwam of Nokomis, Aardvark," said Books Bascom when they were settled snugly inside, face-to-face with their backs and feet against opposite sides of the box. On his knee Books balanced a votive candle in a red glass holder late of St. Bride's Church. By its ruby light Grundig made out his diminutive host, now fat with layers of clothing. Books Bascom had once lived in a swanky town house with Ido, his Japanese houseboy. He'd worn a homburg, gray kid gloves, and carried an elegant walking stick. But he'd seldom found cases worthy of his mental powers and the blush of fine veins on his nose and cheeks suggested how he had passed the time in-between. Now he asked graciously, "Something I can get you?"

Grundig produced the scotch and called for glasses. Transferring the candle to his visitor's knee, Books rattled around in a dim corner, coming up with a milky-looking glass with a toothbrush in it. Grundig poured and took a good slug directly from the bottle himself. "Manny put me onto where you were."

Books wasn't surprised. "She sends him by with a little care package now and then. Just to remind him, there but for the grace of Sweetheart go I. It helps me, too. Things might have been worse. I might have ended up Mr. Sweetheart."

Grundig related the events of the evening.

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Books mourned Biff O'Malley for a moment. Then he said, "In the old days the Roscoe and Fedora boys would've put this Baby Face character out of circulation fast. But as it is, I think dropping the investigation's a good idea."

"You're damn right," said Grundig.

"So it's academic, I know, but the Black Daffodil did ring a bell. The trouble is, the view from the bell tower gets hazy on details that far back. It was nineteen thirty-four, thirty-fiveish. The Black Daffodil murders, the newspapers called it. A crooked P.I. named Joe Felix and some woman turned up dead in bed together in his apartment. But why Black Daffodil? That's the part I don't remember. And when you come down to it, why not narcissus? Why not jonquil?"

"What's the difference?" said Grundig, meaning, "Who cares?"

"Oh, they're all narcissi," explained Books. "But the daffodil's corona, the hornlike part that sticks out, is single and prominent."

"I'm off the case," Grundig insisted.

"Blackmail's a dirty business."

"I don't give a damn about the thirty-eight in the plastic bag."

"Good," said Books. "Why should you? You've earned these golden years. Now sit back and enjoy your memories. Remember the Delfuego Tiara Case, Aardvark?"

Why me, Lord, thought Grundig but held his tongue.

Books continued, "Old Mrs. Delfuego lived on a well-guarded estate with her nephew Wendell. One weekend she invited a group of exotic-furniture fanciers to see her most recent enthusiasm, her inlaid Moroccan coffee-table collection. The guests arrived late on a moonless evening and were shown directly to their rooms. Now the priceless tiara was kept in a safe in the living-room wall directly across from the French doors leading out to the terrace. In between among the usual furnishings were the prized Delfuego coffee tables. At two in the morning a burglar alarm brings a security guard rushing into the living room. He turns on the light and sees the wall safe standing open and a dark figure vanishing through the French doors. A guard patrolling outside witnesses this same figure reenter the house by a side door. But who is the thief, now lost among the guests? Baffled, the police summon me. One look at the scene of the crime and I must laugh out loud. 'Is there any point to which you would like to draw my attention?' said the police inspector indignantly. 'To the curious incident of the bark in the nighttime,' said I. 'But there was no bark in the nighttime,' said he. 'That was the

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curious incident,' I replied. Yes, only Mrs. Delfuego's nephew was familiar enough with the layout to cross the living room at full tilt in the dark without barking a shin on one of those coffee tables.

"What I needed," observed Books, "was a literate confidant, a doctor, say, or a butler. But not a Japanese houseboy. Oh, Ido was a gentleman among gentlemen's gentlemen. I still go to his daughter's once a week for a bath and a warm meal. But prose wasn't Ido's medium. His idea of the Delfuego write-up went:

> ' When plum trees fall
> In long-forsaken groves
> One hand applauds the silence.' "

Grundig drank from the bottle again. Nobody'd ever written anything about him. Not even haiku. And now he gets a chance to be the guy who solves the Black Daffodil Murders and avenge a dead buddy and he loses his nerve.

Books had been watching Grundig's face. "You know," he said, "if you weren't off the case I'd say go talk to Lummocks Lomax. It sticks in my mind that Lummocks, Biff, Joe Felix, and somebody else shared an office back then."

"Is he still kicking?"

"Like a mule. He's night watchman over at Junkyard Industries."

Grundig didn't think there was much chance of running into Baby Face way out there by the gasworks. He put the cap on the bottle. "Take care of yourself, Books."

"You too, Aardvark. And tell your lovely grandchildren Mr. Bascom says stay in school. Don't go for the glory. Go for the diploma. It'll look better on your wall than 'This Side Up.' "

The rangy, hawk-nosed old man in the plastic rain hood had a long stride as he patrolled the inside of the steel-link fence with Grundig working to keep even with him on the other. Since company rules forbad guests inside the junkyard this was the best way to visit and keep warm in the cold, pelting rain. Lomax said, "I got my start as a hotel dick, did you know that, Aardvark? But it didn't work out. Spittoons. Hell, it wasn't a hotel lobby if it didn't have spittoons. And they had me licked from the start. I couldn't take two steps without getting my foot caught in one. That's what got me my dumb lug rep when I turned private detective. I always had to make sure there wasn't a spittoon in the woodpile before I made my move. My

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soul never found true peace until those damn things went out of fashion."

"The Black Daffodil," Grundig reminded him.

"She died a long long time ago," said Lomax. "Back then Biff and I and Pete Sloper—remember Pete?"

Grundig nodded. "The tie guy." Sloper always wore this mail-order tie that glowed "Will you kiss me in the dark, baby?" when you turned out the lights.

"Old Pete died last year," said Lomax. "Lung cancer. He didn't smoke. Had to be the radium in paint on that tie of his. You might say he was killed by his own heartfelt cry for love. Well, anyway, for a while back there Pete, Biff, and I all pooled together with a creep called Joe Felix to rent this dinky little office. And sometimes this woman with a real nice, rich voice would call for Felix and if he was there he'd rush out of the office. If he wasn't there, she'd just hang up. We figured Felix was playing around with some married woman. Biff started calling her the Black Daffodil."

"Why?" demanded Grundig.

Lomax stopped to consider the question, running in place to keep warm. "Who knows?" he said at last and smiled approvingly when Grundig started running in place too. "Anyway, it turned out Felix was working a shakedown racket. This classy hooker would call when she got a likely prospect. Felix would barge in with his flash camera and the sap would end up having to buy the film. When I complained about this being less than legit Felix told me he was only in it to help the hooker get a stake so she could get out of the business. Well, she didn't make it. The police figure a pigeon tracked them back to Felix's apartment, caught them in bed together, and shot them dead. Biff found the bodies. The reporters picked up calling the woman the Black Daffodil from him. Headline writers go for that kind of thing."

They made the rest of the circuit of the junkyard in silence. Back at the gate Grundig offered to pass the bottle through to Lomax so he could toast Biff O'Malley's memory. Lomax shook his head. "Not while I'm on duty. You drink it for me." He started into the little guardhouse at the gate. Then he turned. "Hey, Aardvark, can you imagine you and me living at the old Gat and Hat, clumping around with walkers with a bunch of old coots, all of us talking out of the sides of our mouths?"

"Smelling like whiskey, leather shoulder holsters, gun oil, and BenGay," added Grundig.

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Lomax forced a laugh. "Who needs it, right? You've got your daughter. And I'm a lucky bastard. Like coming so close to marrying Sweetheart. Like Junkyard Industries' dog dying just when I needed the job."

Grundig started to pocket the bottle and head back to the bus stop. But there was less than a finger of whiskey left. He finished it off and heaved the bottle into the darkness. Then came the curious incident of the bottle that didn't smash in the nighttime. Out of the same darkness stepped Baby Face, crowding Grundig with that Mad Dog Timmins smile. "I warned you no sniffing around, old man." Baby Face held the bottle by the neck in one hand and was tapping it against the palm of the other.

It all happened too quickly for Grundig to be afraid. He acted instinctively, jamming his knee hard into the man's groin. He'd never done that to anybody before. It wasn't the kind of fighter he was. But that was then and this was now. And he remembered the couple of times he'd had it done to him how effective it had been.

Baby Face folded up fast like a jackknife. Then he kind of decided against that and tried to straighten up. Grundig's knee found its target again. Baby Face crashed to the ground. Grundig bent over and took the revolver in the plastic bag from the writhing man's pocket.

The keys to the Rolls were still in the ignition. The owner's card in the glove compartment told Grundig what he wanted to know.

The Gunderson Building, One Gunderson Plaza, was one of those fine old downtown skyscrapers well-decorated with granite bouquets and garlands. There were shops at street level, floors of offices above that, and expensive apartments to top the whole thing off. Grundig pretended to examine a nearby antiques shop window while he cased the elevator lobby. He had decided to give himself the satisfaction of confronting the woman before he called the police.

As he stood there Grundig noticed an old phonograph on display. It was enameled tin with a large horn pleated like a morning glory blossom. Grundig wondered about this need to dress up early machines to look like nature, vines and tendrils on the old elevator cages, phonographs like morning glories. As he searched for other examples, suddenly he understood the Black Daffodil part of the business. Smiling grimly Grundig took a deep breath and went into the lobby.

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Mrs. Gladys Rowland answered the door herself, a thin woman with an erect carriage, her hair blue and carefully arranged. She compared Grundig with his business card before waving off the largest doorman, who had insisted on escorting him up in the elevator. Then she ushered Grundig into a spacious living room whose many windows made the city skyline its principal furniture.

"Nice," said Grundig.

"Mr. Rowland, my second husband, did well in South African mines." Her voice was a slightly worn contralto. When they were sitting together on the sofa she nodded at the tray of decanters on the coffee table. "May I offer you a drink . . ." She glanced back at his card. ". . . Mr. Aardvark? I'm afraid you're in for a shock. The Black Daffodil's dead."

"The name's Grundig," said the detective wearily. "The small type down at the bottom. See? 'Harry Grundig, Prop.' Okay? So let's skip the drink and the dancing around. Lady, I can't prove you're the Black Daffodil. But I've got the gun that shot Biff O'Malley." He patted his pocket. "And your fingerprints are all over it. That kid you hired to clean up after you wasn't up to the job."

Mrs. Rowland raised an eyebrow. "Roger's usually a thorough boy." Then she shrugged. "All right. Let's skip the dancing around. Why not? Your friend Biff O'Malley made the mistake of coming between a mother and her daughter's happiness. Mother love is like a license to kill, Mr. Grundig. Or in my case, to kill again. You see, a long time ago a man called Joe Felix and I were in the shakedown business together. But he had a little sideline he didn't think I knew about. Felix always pulled a switch when he handed the sucker the film, keeping the real one for blackmail down the road. But I was on those pictures, too. Now, I meant to get out of the racket. And I sure didn't want Felix showing up one fine day with outstretched palm. I was trying to find those pictures in his apartment that night when he came waltzing in with some dumb floozie as drunk as he was. So I hid in a closet until they were seriously involved in bed. Then I shot them both with the revolver. End of partnership."

"So the woman was just wrong place wrong time?"

"That bastard's bed was always wrong place. Wrong place wrong time was your friend O'Malley. We passed each other under a streetlight when I was heading away from the scene of the crime. I knew who he was. Felix had pointed him out once when we were talking business in some hotel lobby and O'Malley and this other guy who

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shared the office came through heading for the bar. O'Malley knew my voice from my phone calls. Now he had an eyeful, too. I was always afraid I'd run into him again and he'd put the two together."

"And last night at the fights he did."

She nodded. "Nothing's too good for my daughter. But she's what we used to call a social climber. Her second husband is a Gunderson. Number three will probably make the Gundersons look like a bunch of pikers. She plans on being the grande dame of her slice of the upper crust. Which ain't easy to pull off if Mother's a murdering whore." Mrs. Rowland uttered a bitter laugh. "Want to know what's really funny? To this day I don't know why it was called the Black Daffodil Murders."

"That was the nickname Biff O'Malley hung on you from all your phone calls. That's what they looked like, those old desk telephones, remember? Like daffodils. Black daffodils."

The doorbell rang. "That'll be Roger." Mrs. Rowland started to get up. Grundig wagged a finger and she sat back down.

The doorbell rang again. Grundig cursed himself for cutting things too close. Baby Face Roger was pounding on the door now. Grundig's hands began to shake and he felt his face turn gray. Time to call the police. He reached for the phone on the coffee table. The pounding stopped abruptly. As he dialed Grundig asked, "By the way, whose idea was it to go after Lummocks Lomax?"

"Who the hell's that?"

"The other guy with Biff in the hotel lobby."

"Look, I filled Roger in on Joe Felix and the Black Daffodil business," she said. "As I said, he's a thorough boy. Who knows? Maybe he figured this Lomax knew the Black Daffodil's voice, too."

"Or maybe he wanted another corpse killed with the same gun that killed Biff O'Malley," said Grundig as the phone rang at the other end of the line. "I think your Roger's setting you up for blackmail."

"Why would my grandson ever do that?"

Mrs. Rowland's revelation made Grundig look up. The woman was holding a small silver revolver. She gestured for him to hang up the receiver. Grundig obeyed.

"If Roger needs money he only has to ask. I've always been more generous than his mother." Mrs. Rowland edged her voice with metal and ordered, "Now carefully take the thirty-eight from your pocket and place it on the coffee table. Now let's move outside onto the terrace."

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Grundig led the way out into the raw, windy night. "What now?" he wondered out loud.

"I suggest you jump, Mr. Grundig. I'll tell people you were desperate to sell the Black Daffodil, a what?—A yacht? An oil painting?—When I turned you down something snapped and you rushed out here and jumped."

Grundig folded his arms. "Thanks but no thanks."

"Then let's wait for Roger, shall we? He won't be long. Back when he was little and his mother sent him to his room because he'd tortured or killed some pet or other, Roger liked to climb out his window onto the ledge and work his way around here to visit his dear old Gran. Yes, he's coming, Mr. Grundig. Bet on it. So I'll just leave you to Roger. I hope you haven't done anything to make him cranky, in which case he'll probably play with you for a bit. Oh, I shan't watch. That's not my cup of tea. I'll just go back inside and have a drink. But count on it, before Roger's done with you, you'll be begging him to let you jump."

There's nothing like imminent death to focus the mind. Suddenly Grundig saw the truth. "Look," he said, "I was all wet on this. Real wet. Roger wasn't out to blackmail you. It was his mother he wanted. After you're dead there he'd be with your thirty-eight, proof you murdered O'Malley and Lomax. His mother would have to pay up or no more grande dame. I bet your Roger planned on having a lot of fun with her."

Mrs. Rowland's hand with the little automatic in it started to tremble and she hissed as if to drown out his words. "You bastard," she cried, her face a furious grimace. Then she fired.

The bullet buzzed by Grundig's ear. A voice behind him shouted, "Hey, Gran!" Grundig turned. Baby Face Roger stood teetering on the ledge at the corner of the building. "Hey, Gran, it's me!"

Mrs. Rowland fired again. Her grandson lost his icy balance and fell backwards out into space.

Grundig ran to the railing. Then he looked back at Mrs. Rowland in disbelief.

"I'm quite a good shot, Mr. Grundig. I just came close enough to make him lose his balance. He won't have a nick on him. Some young fool daredevil playing at mountain climbing. And it surely wouldn't reflect badly on a woman's social ambitions if, having witnessed the accidental death of a beloved grandson, her mother took her own life." Mrs. Rowland raised the revolver to her temple.

* * *

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Grundig gave the police Mrs. Rowland's version of events, knowing they like things open and shut. When they finally let him go he took the incriminating .38 with him to dispose of down the first storm sewer he came to.

Grundig went back down in the elevator. Too bad the Black Daffodil Murders would never be a movie or seventeen syllables of verse. Or even a story to tell his grandchildren. No, Grundig recalled someone somewhere writing that kids, being innocent, liked stories where justice gets done, whereas grownups, being otherwise, preferred a compassionate tale.

Maybe so. For his part, Grundig found the city more and more an angular and hard-edged place. As he crossed the lobby he even admitted he sometimes missed the twist and turn of vine and tendril. And, hey, what the hell ever happened to those bathtubs that came with lion paws for feet?

Outside the night had turned sleety again. Grundig stopped on the sidewalk to tuck in his scarf and headed home. ●

"Being of sound mind and body, I spent it all."

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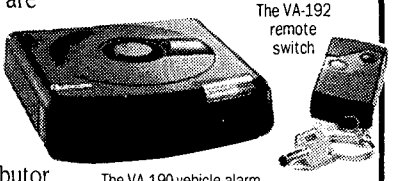

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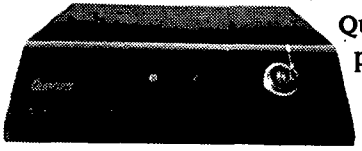

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Torontonian Gregor Robinson earns his living as an economist, but he has also enjoyed considerable success in writing fiction, with stories published in mainstream magazines, crime anthologies, and our sister publication, Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine. *Two of Mr. Robinson's stories earned him nominations for Canada's National Magazine Award. His first story for us is set in his native Canada . . .*

PEARLS AND COLORED STONES

by GREGOR ROBINSON

Leaving Dr. Raines's office after her third visit, Carmel asked, "Do people ever go crazy in these situations?" She herself was not crazy. She had been diagnosed as clinically depressed. She felt as though she were living under a thick blanket. It wasn't her fault, and she wanted out.

Dr. Raines looked at the floor and scratched his head. They were standing by the door to the waiting room. Carmel saw that he was reluctant to answer, and she thought perhaps it had been a mistake to ask. Dr. Raines was always asking her these veiled questions about suicide: Did she ever imagine she might die? Did she fantasize about being dead, about looking down on her own funeral? But that isn't what she had meant at all. She was thinking more along the lines of cutting off all her hair, withdrawing all her money from the bank, taking the next plane to South America. That sort of thing. A radical reordering of priorities.

"Do they ever go right off the deep end?" she asked.

"I suppose sometimes they do," said Dr. Raines. "But not people like you and me. We're too smart for that. What we've got to do is get you back liking yourself. See if we can't get Howard in here." He smiled, put his hand on her elbow to guide her to the door.

"What do they do?" asked Carmel, "these people who go off the deep end?"

"Well. Sometimes they attempt murder."

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The way Carmel holds the basket in her lap irritates Howard. She grips it tightly, like a child afraid that a treasure may be snatched away. To Howard she appears pathetic and incongruous in a car that cost him close to sixty thousand dollars. The car smells of rich leathers. She has said nothing since they left the house, hasn't answered his question. Finally, without turning to look at him, she says, "Burglars."

Earlier that morning, after a latish breakfast—latish is one of Carmel's words—Howard had loaded the Jaguar. The other car in the garage is a black Porsche. Howard rarely uses the Porsche; he says that it doesn't really suit him. He's heard the jokes: a Porsche means you're having an affair. Carmel used to call the car Howard's lollipop. She would wink when she said it.

Carmel had come out of the house about twenty minutes after Howard with Amadeus, the Jack Russell which Howard bought for her when Anna went away to school, on a leather lead behind her. She wore slacks and a woollen jacket which they had bought at Bloomingdale's on one of their whirlwind trips to New York. (Howard and Carmel take frequent short holidays. Short holidays are more convenient for Howard to arrange between his occasional appearances in court, his meetings with executive committees and forestry companies with a proclivity to sue, merge, and acquire. Carmel does freelance PR work; her schedule is flexible.)

Carmel carried nothing to the car but her handbag and the round red basket which had originally been a child's sewing kit.

"Why on earth are you bringing that?" Howard asked. Carmel hadn't answered.

The weekend away is Howard's idea. He wants something to happen. He wants to put the past behind them, but he doesn't know how to do it, if it's even possible.

Carmel says, "I was worried about burglars." Still she doesn't turn to look at him as they speed away from the traffic light.

Howard and Carmel live in a neighbourhood of large houses where there have recently been many burglaries. Windows have been smashed, doors broken, the contents of drawers, cupboards, and secret places strewn around. Sometimes there has been wanton destruction—obscenities on the walls, electronic equipment wrecked. After the break-ins, the houses look the same from the outside. In the front gardens are maple trees planted generations before. It's impossible from outside to guess at the mayhem that lies within.

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People say this is life at the end of the twentieth century, but the events are shocking to Howard because in his own life violence has been rare.

Carmel says, "I suppose you still won't go and see Dr. Raines." She turns to look at Howard; he knows that she's gauging his response.

Howard says, "We've been over this before." He keeps his eyes fixed on the road.

One morning the previous June, Carmel came downstairs and told Howard that she would like to visit a psychiatrist. Howard was having his breakfast on the terrace. At great cost, and with much thought by a firm of noted landscape architects, the back garden had been planted with small trees, bushes, and shrubs in such a way that no other house was visible from where Howard sat. It was a remarkable achievement in a garden that was midtown in a city of over two million people. But there had been a price to pay: the flowers had to go. There was not a single flowering plant in that garden.

Howard looked up from his morning paper when Carmel told him about the psychiatrist.

"Lots of people I know are doing it," said Carmel. She was more tentative about the decision to see Dr. Raines than she has since become.

Howard thought about the hundred or so lawyers in the firm where he worked. He thought about the men at the Racquet Club, people on the charitable and private boards on which he sat. None of them was seeing a psychiatrist—not as far as Howard knew.

"Fine," said Howard.

"Will you come, too?" Carmel said.

"Why on earth would I want to see a bloody shrink?"

At the dinner parties Howard and Carmel attend, people discuss where they hide their jewelry. One woman keeps her diamonds in the bottom of a salt box. Another puts her jewels in a sock in a children's toy box, or above the pipes in the furnace room. A more elaborate technique is to sew precious stones into the hem of a heavy curtain. What is amazing is how often these secret places are discovered by cunning burglars.

None of the hiding places would be adequate for large quantities of stones, for really valuable jewellery. Daisy Downs's jewels are kept in a basement vault at a downtown bank. Inherited on her

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grandmother's side, her jewels have their origins in the Polish royal family. So it is said in the neighbourhood. When Daisy Downs wears her jewels, she must sign a release form for the insurance company. Howard has always been grateful that Carmel doesn't make comparisons, even in fun, between her rather ordinary jewels and those of Daisy Downs. All the same, he once advised Daisy, speaking as her lawyer rather than as her lover, that she ought not to wear her jewels except to really grand events. To wear such stones was asking for trouble.

Carmel keeps her pearls and precious stones in the open, in the small red basket on the bathroom windowsill. The basket also contains hair pins, buttons, beads and costume jewelry, colored balls of soap and bath oil, sachets of perfumed powders. This weekend, Carmel has decided to take the basket with her. As they continue up the highway, she says to Howard, "I want to go through the basket, to separate the pearls from the fakes and colored stones."

Howard has been in the habit of giving Carmel pearls on anniversaries and special occasions. "Our pearls." The pearls are additions to the necklace he'd given her years before, to make one large string or perhaps a couple of smaller ones. Carmel somehow never gets around to taking the pearls to the jeweler to have the job finished. One day, the pearls will be passed on to Anna; that is the plan.

Carmel says, "I want to sort things out."

It's a phrase she uses a lot lately.

Just past Midland, they stop at a restaurant beside a gas station. It's the off-season; they are the only people in the place. Carmel holds the basket in her lap. She had not wanted to leave it in the car with the dog. The restaurant is silent except for the faint twang of country music from a radio in the kitchen.

Howard's knife and fork clatter against the thick dinner plate. He finishes his salad. He says to Carmel, "Aren't you having lunch?"

"I'm not hungry," she says.

She has ordered only coffee. She has not been hungry for days, weeks. Her symptoms are changing and Howard feels he ought to do something. He wants to do something, to atone. He worries that it may be too late.

At first, she had seemed to go into a kind of stupor. She slept a lot. In the afternoon, she'd lie on the chesterfield in the rose-colored living room and listen to the same discs on the CD over and over again. Billy Joel. Barbra Streisand. Music that he had never heard

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before and that he would come to hate. Once or twice he came home early and found her. She would rise from the chesterfield with deliberate casualness. "I was just resting, listening to some music." It was as though he had caught her at something.

Once Howard awoke in the night and found the place in the bed beside him cold and empty. Carmel was in Anna's room, sitting in darkness on the edge of the bed. The curtains were open and the room was bathed in pale moonlight, crisscrossed by the skeletal shadows of the maple trees. Posters hung on the walls: the Olympics, track and field stars, a picture of Michael Jackson from Anna's prerunning era. On the mantelpiece—the fireplaces in the house were no longer used; broadloom continued right into the fire box—were small porcelain figures from England: Peter Rabbit, Mopsy, Flopsy, and Cottontail. The room was clean with the emptiness of a child's room after the child has grown and gone.

Carmel looked up at Howard. "Tell me again," she said, "why did we send Anna away?"

Anna was at boarding school. In Howard's family, children had always been sent to boarding school. Carmel said, "It would be better for me if Anna were at home. Maybe for both of us." Her voice was flat. It was a discussion they had had before. In two years Anna would be entering college; then she would be gone for good.

Howard took Carmel gently by the hand and led her back to the bedroom. It was as though she was sleepwalking, but he knew she was awake because he felt her shivering. He pulled the bedclothes around her, brushing her cheek with the back of his fingers. She stared into the darkness.

The sleeping in the afternoons, the listening to the music, the waking up in the middle of the night; all this has stopped. Now there is this activity, the sorting through things, the not eating much. As he peruses the lunch check, Howard says, "How can you just stop eating?"

Carmel says, "The fight or flight response."

She's taken to wearing her thick dark hair, now with a touch of grey, pulled away from her face and pinned at the back, like an athlete. Howard would like to ask her about this—it's a style he particularly dislikes—but decides against it.

By the time they turn off onto the dirt road that will take them to Georgian Bay, it's midafternoon. Early November, the sky is slate grey. At the landing, the parking lot is empty. This is how Carmel

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likes it least—without the cars and the bustle and the hot insistence of summer. Most of the slips and moorings are empty. At one of the corrugated metal storage buildings, a couple of Ojibway work a tractor with a hydraulic lift, putting boats away for the winter.

Carmel watches Howard speaking to the men, asking one of them to take them out to the island. (Howard being authoritative.) She watches him, the man she married, the man who takes lessons regularly for his tennis and skiing, who dislikes dogs for their messiness, who keeps a list of the books he has read, who takes trips to the wilderness with his friends, carefully planned months in advance; who likes strong martinis but who never has a drink after dinner, who denies himself Nanaimo bars—which he loves above all other food—whose weight has not changed in all the years she has known him.

Yet what had he told her?—that life is tangled and complicated, that the human heart will not be bound; that passion is not orderly, cannot be denied. So where did the two of them meet? Who arranged their appointments? Who planned ahead to make the motel room reservations? Howard is the most orderly person she has ever known.

Howard waves to her from across the parking lot. The boat is loaded, he has the dog in his arms, they are ready to leave.

The journey takes half an hour. The island is more westerly than any other and faces the open waters of the lake which Carmel has come to love. When they arrive at the boathouse, built high on the shore as protection against winter winds, the Ojibway boatmen unload the luggage and groceries onto the dock. Howard handles the liquor—the wine, the vermouth, the two bottles of Beefeater. He does not like to be caught short. If there is a scene, she knows that Howard will want it to be irrigated with gin. She carries only her large handbag and the little basket of pearls and stones. The dog has bounded ahead; they can hear him yapping at squirrels.

Carmel follows Howard up the path from the dock. The sound of the outboard dies away. They are enveloped by trees; Carmel can smell the pine and earth. The path opens up as they pass through the glade, the only place on the island where grass grows thick and lush. Beaten down in summer, the grass is now tall; it brushes against Carmel's ankles. She can feel the autumn air and the grass against her legs, see the pale sun winking through the fir trees. Reminding her. She was nineteen years old when she first came here.

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Carmel met Howard at a dance in the college cafeteria. The drinks were Purple Jesuses—grain alcohol mixed with grape juice. After a dance to the music of the Rolling Stones ("The Last Time"), Carmel took Howard by the hand and drew him outside to the covered walkway. She stopped suddenly, turned, drew him to her. Authoritative Howard—he did not know what was happening; their foreheads bumped, then he relaxed and she was kissing him.

"I've been wanting to do that for ages," she said.

In those days, the problem for people who lived in dorms was where to make love. A few nights after the Purple Jesuses, lying on one of the hard pews of the chapel amidst their tangled clothing, she said, "What about the island you told me about. Why don't we go there?" Howard was the first person Carmel had known to come from that world: inherited money, boarding schools, a summer place that had been in the family for generations.

She has realized for some time that their meeting was a decision she had made, not Howard. He would tell her later that he had not noticed her at first. Her most distinctive features were not flashy: her glossy dark hair, her eyes—piercing, back-lit blue; her hands. For a woman she had very large hands. They were like her father's, an immense man, a farmer, a pillar of the United Church.

Once, after they had been married ten years, Carmel's father said to Howard, "What kind of lawyer are you anyway?" They were sitting across from one another at the table in the summer kitchen.

"Corporate and commercial," said Howard.

"You ever go into court?"

"Not if I can help it."

"I need a lawyer. You any good?"

Howard shrugged and smiled. "My father was in law. My grandfather, too."

"Is that so?" said Carmel's father. Like Carmel, he had the most piercing blue eyes. "I always thought Carmel should go in for the law. In my opinion, she would make an excellent judge."

He had not hired Howard as his lawyer.

Together Carmel and Howard unpack the groceries. The downstairs of the house is in semidarkness because the man had been in the process of putting the shutters up when Howard called to say they were coming. It strikes Carmel that this is how these summer

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houses are for most of the year: dark, shuttered, silent except for the creaking of the wind.

Howard goes upstairs to the bedroom. Carmel follows a few minutes later. She stops on the landing to admire the view, the waves coming in from the northwest. She continues upstairs, past the door of her and Howard's room to the guest room. She lies on the bed.

An unseasonable warm breeze, from the tail end of summer, wafts through the door from the balcony and across Carmel's face. Howard calls her. She does not answer. She realizes now that this is what she had been expecting. It would be part of Howard's solution—the reason he wanted to come here.

Through the wooden walls, she hears him rise from the bed and pad along the hall. He enters the guest room. Carmel does not move. She lies, eyes open wide, staring at the plain pine boards of the ceiling. Howard comes forward, leans over her, kisses her once, then again. After a few moments she acquiesces and puts her arms around his neck. They do not speak. Twenty-two years ago she had come here for the first time, to this room. They arrived at four in the afternoon; they made love on the grass of the glade along the path before they even reached the house.

They doze. The shadows lengthen in the twilight. The air turns cold: early November on the Precambrian shield. They lie tangled under the musky feather quilt, naked.

Like lovers.

When she was introduced to Daisy Downs at a dinner party, it was immediately clear to Carmel that Howard had already met her. "I am not a fool," she said afterwards, sounding, she knew, like the wronged woman from an old movie. Daisy had recently moved from Montreal. She was a widow of forty. There was the connection to Polish royalty. She was an occasional guest of the Rockefellers at Pontico Hills. Her brother was in the British House of Lords. Luncheons and soirées had been arranged to welcome her.

Carmel had asked, "Where did you first meet her, anyway?"

"I sit on a board with her."

"Do you know how pretentious that sounds? 'I sit on a board with her.' Well good for goddamn you."

Howard had not responded to this. He never responded to outbursts. After a time Carmel said, "It will never last."

"Pardon?" said Howard. "What will never last?"

"You fool," said Carmel.

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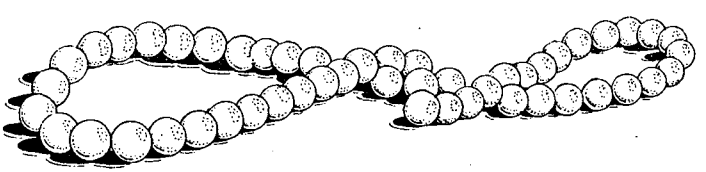
She remembers that Howard had tried to appear chastised; the result had been a grin, as though in the midst of it all he could not help feeling satisfied with himself, and his immense, unruly passions. It seemed to Carmel that instead of remorse, Howard felt like a boy in the lives of these two women, and that it was a role he rather liked. "Some kind of stupid adolescent when we talk about it," she told Dr. Raines, "detachment the rest of the time. And irritation. *Him* being irritated!"

"And what are your feelings?" Dr. Raines had asked.

Carmel is wide awake. The wind has come up. The house is beginning to creak, the shutters to rattle. She is thinking about tomorrow. Such a fresh breeze blowing, as though a new day is about to begin!

Roused by the sound of the waves on the shore and the body of his wife beside him, Howard turns and draws Carmel to him. Carmel at once pushes him over, straddles him. She reaches above her head and unclips her hair, which falls about her face as though she were twenty again. Her breasts sway rosy pink above him in the half-darkness. Howard closes his eyes.

Something cold and sharp in his throat. He can't breathe. His mouth is full. He begins to choke. His eyes open. Pearls and colored stones fall from his mouth—spill and gather in the folds of the sheets behind his head. Carmel continues, over and over; she takes pearls and stones from the sewing basket on the bedside table and jams them into his mouth. Some of the jewelry, pearls they feel like, are now deep in the back of his throat—Howard wants to vomit, he will choke on his vomit and the sharp stones. He can't breathe. He lurches forward but Carmel has her left hand flat on his breastbone. He turns his head. Cultured pearls and pink stones fall from his mouth onto the floor. He hears them clatter and roll beneath the bed. He hears the sound of Carmel's bare feet as she walks across the room. He hears blood rushing in his temples. The sounds fade.



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THE JURY BOX
by JON L. BREEN

Detective fiction has always been self-referential, probably more so than any other category of popular fiction. Sherlock Holmes himself discussed earlier fictional sleuths, Poe's Dupin and Gaboriau's Lecoq, ostensibly to assert his own superiority but more subtly to acknowledge his, and Conan Doyle's, debt to them. From the 1890s to the present, other fictional sleuths have made countless references to Holmes as the enduring archetype, while espionage fiction characters since the sixties have paid similar tribute to James Bond. John Dickson Carr's Dr. Fell devotes a whole chapter of *The Three Coffins* (1935; British title *The Hollow Man*) to the various solutions to locked-room problems, complete with the fictional references appropriate to a discussion of this most artificial of mystery situations, while Agatha Christie's Hercule Poirot discourses on fictional detection early in his 1963 case, *The Clocks*. Even when specific names are not mentioned, mystery writers and their characters are always comparing their situations to the expectations of fiction.

A more recent phenomenon is the allusion as professional courtesy. Obscure cozy writer Amanda Buckwheat has her series sleuth Pussy Manners pick up in the airport bookshop a novel by obscure cozy writer (and Amanda's close friend) Wanda Bee Rider. Little-known Omaha private eye Brick O'Hoolihan calls for help from equally little-known Portland shamus Johnny Latrine—their creators are drinking buddies. Well-intended as these allusions are, they're usually a bad idea. References to other fictional characters, unless to universally famous names like Holmes and Bond, are jarring and distracting. Only when the background is mystery writing, publishing, or bookselling, as in Carolyn G. Hart's Annie Laurence Darling novels, are references to relatively obscure mystery writers justified in fiction.

Lawrence Block's Bernie Rhodenbarr, returning for the first time in ten years, has the bookdealer excuse for mystery references, and the authors he alludes to are anything but obscure: Sue Grafton, whose alphabetical title pattern becomes the target of puns and whose heroine Kinsey Millhone's sexual preference is questioned, and Lilian Jackson Braun (see below), whose detecting cats have a possible rival in Rhodenbarr's Raffles. The genre references are just one way Block tells us how little seriously to take his newest novel, as artificial and light-hearted as the Nero Wolfe pastiches he used to write as Chip Harrison.

**** Lawrence Block: *The Burglar Who Traded Ted Williams*, Dutton, $19.95. His book business threat-

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ened with an impossible rent increase, Rhodenbarr yields to temptation and returns to his larcenous vocation in a funny and complex puzzle involving collectible baseball trading cards and a body in a bathroom. This novel has as good an example of Golden Age-style puzzle-making as you are likely to find in the current market, including even a short-lived locked room problem and one of the most extended gathering-of-the-suspects scenes since they stopped making *Thin Man* movies.

*** Bill Crider: . . . *A Dangerous Thing,* Walker, $19.95. The third book-length case for Pecan City, Texas college professor Carl Burns is as light-hearted and humorous as Block's book and as apt to refer to other mystery fiction. Crider's taste in allusions runs to old-timers rather than contemporaries, though; and cozy and gentle as Burns's cases are, his reading tastes run to tough paperback writers like Charles Williams, Jim Thompson, Harry Whittington, and John D. MacDonald. (He also finds time to drop such comparatively obscure names as J.M. Flynn, Bob McKnight, and Milton K. Ozaki.) Murder once again comes to Hartley Gorman College, the St. Mary Mead of academia, after a newly appointed feminist dean introduces the campus to political correctness. Crider's satirical approach will comfort neither PC proponents nor their loudest detractors.

**** Edna Buchanan: *Miami, It's Murder,* Hyperion, $21.95. In a modular journalism procedural that grabs the reader and won't let go, reporter Britt Montero crosses paths with a serial rapist who hides in women's restrooms and a prominent politician who may have been implicated in the death of a little girl years before. Several other mysteries are involved, some connected, some not. Buchanan's novel is a winner on all fronts: insider details of journalism and police work, a vivid realization of the Miami background, effective scenes of action and suspense, and a nice reverse on what looked like a predictable conclusion.

*** Soledad Santiago: *Nightside,* Doubleday/Perfect Crime, $18.50. Santiago shares with Buchanan the ability to make her locale come to life: the evocation of the New Year streets is the strongest feature of the book. Former nun Anna Eltern, operator of a Hell's Kitchen refuge for homeless youth, encounters a serial killer and an allegation of sexual abuse along with the usual bureaucratic problems. This is not quite as fine a book as it starts out to be—the solution is disappointing in one major respect, the plotting a bit too thin and the polemics occasionally too emphatic —but it is certainly a good one, combining romantic suspense with unprettified urban realism.

*** Michael Gilbert: *Roller Coaster,* Carroll & Graf, $19.95. Patrick Petrella, long a favorite of *EQMM* readers, returns to confront a variety of connected and unconnected cases as superintendent of police in the East London docklands. Among the most pressing problems are thwarting a ring of pornographers who prey on British boys on school trips to Amsterdam and finding the murderer of a muckraking journalist critical of

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the police. Like countryman Julian Symons, Gilbert has entered his ninth decade in splendid form. Unlike its predecessor, *The Queen Against Karl Mullen* (1991), this won't rank with his very best novels, but his fans won't be disappointed.

** Lilian Jackson Braun: *The Cat Who Came to Breakfast,* Putnam, $19.95. Independently wealthy journalist Jim Quilleran and cats Koko and Yum Yum go to the newly commercialized, multiple-named Breakfast Island to investigate a series of deaths and accidents to tourists. This is the American cozy at its coziest. Psychic feline sleuths are not my cup of tea, but Braun has her formula down pat: leisurely pace, pleasantly clunky style, plenty of local color, charm, and gentle humor.

One of the mystery field's leading scholar/critics has strayed outside the field—but not too far—in his latest book. Francis M. Nevins, Jr.'s *Bar-20: The Life of Clarence E. Mulford, Creator of Hopalong Cassidy* (McFarland & Company, Box 611, Jefferson, NC 98640; $32.50), though primarily for western fiction buffs and surely indispensable to any Mulford collector, points out Hoppy often acted as a detective and includes references to John Dickson Carr, R. Austin Freeman, Conan Doyle, Chesterton's Father Brown, and the TV show *Columbo.*

Among the latest fruits of publisher Otto Penzler's determination to keep the classics of detective fiction alive are reprints of Emma Lathen's first John Putnam Thatcher novel, *Banking on Death* ($6.95), originally published in 1961; Vincent Starrett's pioneering Sherlockian anthology, *221B: Studies in Sherlock Holmes* ($7.95), first published in 1940 and including the editor's incomparable pastiche "The Adventure of the Unique Hamlet"; and S.S. Van Dine's notorious 1938 travesty *The Gracie Allen Murder Case* ($6.95), not a distinguished book by any standard but one that Philo Vance completists will be pleased to have available.

Among the other recent reprints is a strong collection of five Cornell Woolrich tales, *Rear Window and Other Stories* (Penguin, $5.95), including an interesting new dedication by copyright-holder Sheldon Abend but lacking the Nevins introduction that led off the Ballantine edition. The latest from the Rex Stout Library is the 1960 Nero Wolfe novel *Too Many Clients* (Bantam, $4.99). For the first time, the publishers have gone outside the mystery field for their introducer, Malcolm Forbes, Jr. "The World of Rex Stout" appendix reproduces the sexy cover of the 1962 first paperback edition and a Kirkus review with the unlikely warning the book might be too erotic for some readers!

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a *NEW* short story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

This month Ed Hoch's contribution is a non-series story whose structure was suggested by a Henry James tale entitled "Four Meetings." One of the author's first stories for EQMM, *"I'd Know You Anywhere" (10/63), used this same structural device, following two characters through four meetings over a period of years—all of which shows that an interesting form can be employed successfully in many different ways . . .*

FOUR MEETINGS

by EDWARD D. HOCH

I saw her but four times, as Henry James once wrote, though I remember them vividly. She made her impression on me, before she died so tragically. Her name was Vivian Maxwell—Vivian, like the mistress of Merlin, the Lady of the Lake.

1.

I remember that first time well, because it was the day of my first column for the newspaper. My upgrading from city desk reporter to editorial page columnist while still in my thirties had brought envious congratulations from most of my coworkers. Now, seated at my new word processor staring at the flickering screen, I debated among three or four topics with which to launch my career as a columnist. Finally I decided to go with the most controversial—in this state, at least—and began writing a column opposing capital punishment. A young black man had been put to death by lethal injection the previous night for killing two clerks in a convenience store robbery. It seemed like the topic of the day.

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My editor came down to my desk later, after he'd read it, and peered at me gloomily. "Couldn't we have started off with a bit less controversy, Rudy?"

"Controversy builds circulation."

"Yeah," he said and walked away. He didn't mention it again.

The first column was finished and I decided to go across the street for lunch. That was when I spotted the tall young woman in the green coat standing by the unoccupied reception desk waiting for someone to help her. "Are you here to see anyone?" I asked.

She wasn't quite a beauty, but she was definitely worth a second look. Her perfect complexion, charming smile, and swept-back blond hair invited attention, and she had the sort of big round eyes that seemed to take in everything at a glance. I guessed her age at near thirty and I noticed at once that she wore no rings. "I'm looking for Arnold Quain," she said, her eyes scanning the newsroom desks.

"Arnold moved to New York last week. Actually I'm his replacement, Rudy Fine."

"Vivian Maxwell," she said, extending a slim, pale hand.

"Is there anything I could do for you?"

"Mr. Quain had promised to research some material for me."

"Research?" Then I remembered that he'd doubled as the paper's Sunday travel editor in addition to doing his column. "Was this on travel?"

"Well, yes." Her big round eyes took a new interest in me. "Are you working on travel, too?"

"No, but I have his files. It's possible that what you want might be in there. Could you tell me what it's about?"

"Well, that's a pretty long story." She studied me for another moment, as if making up her mind, and then said, noticing the raincoat over my arm, "Are you on your way out?"

"Just across the street for a sandwich. Would you like to join me? We can talk while we eat." I probably wouldn't have extended the invitation if she hadn't been a reasonably attractive young woman. I think we both realized that.

"Thank you, that's very nice. I would like to track down this material, if Arnold had a chance to do it before he left."

The restaurant across the street was called the Front Page and catered to the foibles of its journalist neighbors. I chose a table in the corner away from the crowd and we ordered soup and sandwiches. Though it was early April the weather still carried the chill of win-

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ter. "Now what was it he was researching for you?" I asked when the waiter had left us.

"Mind if I smoke?" she asked, noticing the ashtray on the table.

"Go ahead."

She lit a cigarette and said, "Terrible habit. I'm trying to give it up." Then she focused her round eyes on me. "I met Arnold at a New Year's Eve party, and I happened to mention that I had an opportunity to invest a little money in a new resort being built by a lake in southern Mexico. It's a really remote area and I was wondering if any research had been done on the tourist potential there. He promised to look into it and let me know. I didn't hear from him so I phoned him in late February and he said he'd get some information for me. I was downtown today so I stopped by the paper."

"Tell me where this lake area is."

"In Tabasco in southern Mexico. I had a Catholic childhood reading Graham Greene, and Tabasco still conjures up pictures of religious persecution and imprisoned priests."

"That was a long time ago," I assured her. "Back in the nineteen thirties."

"But does the area have any potential for tourists?"

I didn't know the answer to that. I knew the cruise ships stopped at Cancún on the Yucatán Peninsula, but that was five hundred miles to the northeast. "I'll see what I can find in Arnold's files. What's the name of the lake?"

"Zacatel. It's inland, in a very remote area."

Our food arrived and I made light conversation. "If you don't mind my asking, how did you ever become involved with investing in such a faraway place?"

"My father left me some money when he died. An investment manager named Iberico immediately started phoning me from Mexico City, claiming to have been a friend of my father's. He told me about this great investment opportunity at Lake Zacatel. I've been putting him off for six months now but I still don't know any more about the area than I did then."

"We'll go back across the street and see if I can find anything in the files." We chatted about the weather and about Arnold Quain's new job in New York until the sandwiches were finished. Then I paid the check and helped her into her coat. She was almost as tall as me, and with her heels on we were about equal. Five-eight, maybe, with long legs. But I was still married then, and I put those thoughts out of my mind.

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Quain's files were a typical hodgepodge, and I knew that mine would be no better if I ever moved on to another job. I thought I was doing well when I came up with a thick folder on Mexico, but the only thing I found on the state of Tabasco was a newspaper clipping on petroleum exports. Otherwise the folder contained the usual tourist brochures and maps, mainly concentrating on Mexico City and the resorts of the Pacific coast. There was no evidence that he'd ever tried to research Vivian Maxwell's question. But then, I asked myself, why should he? She was someone he barely knew, met once at a party. With a few drinks in him, he'd offered to help her. Later he'd probably forgotten the whole thing until she phoned him.

I went out to the bench where Vivian was waiting. She'd removed her green coat and was seated with her long legs crossed, eyes scanning the newsroom as if expecting a late flash at any moment. "Sorry," I told her. "I can't find a thing in his files. He might have just gotten so busy, with changing jobs and all, that he didn't get a chance to research anything."

"Are you handling travel now?" she asked hopefully.

"No. I'm doing his editorial page column, but they haven't appointed a new travel writer yet."

She stood up, smoothing her skirt, and reached for the coat. "Well, thanks for your time, and also for the lunch. I feel as if I've imposed on you."

"Not at all."

She smiled as she went out. "Thanks again, Rudy Fine," she said, letting me know that she remembered my name. "I'll look for your columns."

I was grinning as I walked back to my desk, feeling pleased that this attractive woman had joined me for lunch and seemed interested in what sort of columns I'd write. I thought about referring to her in one of them, without mentioning her by name, of course, but that seemed too much like an adolescent artifice.

Late that afternoon, however, when I thought of her again, I decided to phone Arnold Quain's number in New York. Maybe he had researched her question and learned something that I could pass along to her. When he answered it was in the same gruff manner I'd come to know and love. "Arnold, this is Rudy Fine back home. How're you doing?"

"It's been raining ever since I got here, and my apartment's about the size of a postage stamp. Otherwise everything's fine."

"Glad to hear it, Arnold."

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"What's up? Did they fire you already?"

"Not yet. A friend of yours stopped by today, looking for you. Name's Vivian Maxwell. She thought you were doing some research for her."

I'd imagined Arnold chuckling and giving me some wise answer. What I didn't imagine was the silence that followed. "Arnold?"

At last he spoke, softly but very distinctly. "That woman's trouble, Rudy. Stay away from her."

"Trouble? What kind of—?"

But I heard a click and the line went dead.

2.

During the months that followed the troubles with my marriage finally came to a head. We were separated by the end of summer and divorced by mid-January. With the bulk of the winter still ahead of me, I decided it was time for a vacation. I debated between Florida and California, and finally settled on Mexico City. The main reason for the choice was a conference of American, Canadian, and Hispanic writers being held there. The need to get away could be effectively combined with the appearance of furthering my craft.

So I flew into the Mexico City airport, on the eastern fringes of the sprawling metropolis, in the third week of January. By some estimates this was already the largest city in the world, and by any estimate it was a city of contrasts. At night the most garishly lit structure was the eighteen-story National Lottery Building at the corner of Reforma and Avenida Juarez. I could see it from the window of my hotel room as I unpacked. The weather was surprisingly cool, though a bellman who showed me to my room promised warmer days ahead.

I went through a few sessions of the writers' conference the next two days, and then took off to see a bit of the city. I passed street-corner stalls and magic stores offering herbs and amulets for sorcery, then moved on to the National Palace and the huge mural by Diego Rivera. Posters for bullfights and jai alai decorated the walls of buildings. Everywhere there were people, old and young, rich and poor. Finally, late in the afternoon, I stopped in the bar of an American hotel to relax with a beer. That was when I saw her—Vivian Maxwell—nearly ten months after our first meeting.

This time she was not alone. A middle-aged man with a dark moustache and slicked-back dark hair was seated with her, talking intently over drinks. At first I doubted my eyes at the sight of her,

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but there could be no mistaking the large round eyes and perfect complexion, even if I couldn't see the sleek long legs that I knew were hidden by the table. They were dressed casually, drinking two bottles of Corona beer, and like me they might have been relaxing after a full day of sightseeing.

Intent on the conversation, she didn't seem to notice me. I rose to leave first, and as I passed her table I paused and said, "Miss Maxwell! What a surprise seeing you here!"

"Hello, Mr. Fine." She showed no surprise, and I realized she must have seen me when I entered. "Roberto Azul, this is Rudy Fine." As we shook hands she added, "Mr. Fine is a journalist."

If it weren't for the rumpled suit I'd have picked him as a lawyer. He had that look about him and I amended my guess to a banker or civil servant, but no further explanation was forthcoming. We exchanged a few words and then Azul said, "I must be going. It was good seeing you again, Vivian. Keep in touch."

She gave him her best smile. "Oh, I will." Then she turned her attention to me, and it was as if Roberto Azul had never existed. "Please sit down, Rudy Fine. How is life back in your city?"

I accepted her invitation. "I thought it was your city, too."

"I was just there for a time. Are you in Mexico on business?"

"Writers' conference."

"Here at the hotel?"

"Different hotel. I was out seeing the sights and stopped for a beer."

"Let me buy you another in return for that lunch."

I didn't resist, but I did say, "You don't owe me anything. I was never able to find anything on that Mexican lake area."

She smiled. "Lake Zacatel."

"That's the one. Are you still pursuing it down here?"

"No, I decided it wouldn't be a wise investment. I'm just on vacation."

"Is Roberto a close friend?"

That brought one of her laughs. "Not in the way you mean. I'm quite unattached at present."

"I wasn't asking that."

Her big eyes seemed to drill into me. "Weren't you, Rudy Fine?"

It was my turn to chuckle. "Am I that obvious? I've gotten a divorce since the last time we met, and I guess I haven't yet grasped the correct procedures around unattached women."

"I believe it comes naturally."

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Her words seemed to encourage me. "Then how about dinner tonight?"

"I can't." She seemed genuinely disappointed. "But later in the week—"

"I'm only here for a few days. I fly home tomorrow night when the conference ends."

"I'm really sorry." She glanced at her watch. "And now I have to go off and meet someone. But I have your address at the paper. Perhaps I'll write you sometime and we can arrange to get together. I'd like that."

"Sure," I said, not too hopefully. "It would be fun."

Stay away from her, Arnold Quain had said on the phone. *That woman's trouble.* I wondered what he'd meant.

I finished my beer and she paid the check, glancing apologetically at her watch. "I really must be going, Rudy Fine. You'll hear from me."

I watched her walk out the door of the hotel, hurrying across the wide busy street. Then, on the spur of the moment, I decided to do something I'd never done in my life. I followed her.

I suppose I expected her to meet Roberto Azul or some other man. It seemed more than likely, and it made my trailing her all the more irrational. I'd met the woman twice in my life. She owed me nothing, not even the truth. Still, there was something bothering me. Perhaps it was only the memory of Quain's words on the phone, or the quick way in which she'd identified me as a journalist to Azul. Had the man left suddenly because of that?

She was wearing a blue and white dress with a jacket over it, and it was easy to keep her in sight even from some distance back. After a time she crossed into Chapultepec Park and started up one of its gentle slopes. Once she seemed to turn for a glance back, but I was far enough away to avoid detection. She headed deeper into the large park, finally slowing her pace as she approached the zoo. A crowd had gathered to watch three elephants performing their tricks as the trainer urged them on. Vivian paused at the edge of the crowd, beneath a towering cypress tree. Almost at once she was joined by a small boy, no more than ten years old. She bent down to hug him and took his hand.

Whatever I'd been expecting, this wasn't it. She had a young friend, perhaps even her son, in the city. Roberto Azul might even be the father, a former husband or lover. Whatever the case, it didn't

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concern me. I turned and headed back toward my [illegible] them to enjoy their outing together.

The final afternoon session of the conference [illegible] started when I returned, and I found a seat in a [illegible] hall. Later, a few of us adjourned to the bar, and after a round of drinks someone suggested we dine together around eight-thirty. There were six of us in the party, including two young women, and it seemed like a fine idea. We all went upstairs to change, arranging to meet in the lobby.

I turned on the television as I dressed, watching the Spanish language program I could hardly understand. One seemed to be an interview with a well-known bullfighter, showing clips of him in action. Exactly at eight o'clock they cut away to carry the National Lottery drawing, which was apparently held three times a week at the garishly lit building I could see from my window. I watched a huge revolving cage on the screen, holding thousands of little numbered balls. Mexican boys in bright red military-style uniforms and hats operated the cage and turned a tap that released one ball down a wire chute. One boy placed the ball on a spindle, teaming it with a second ball giving the amount of the prize, and read it off in Spanish. "Number five thousand two hundred sixty-three," he sang out. "Fifty thousand new pesos!" The process seemed to go on endlessly until the top prize, equivalent to about $200,000, was drawn. I sighed and turned off the television.

The evening was a pleasant one, and I ended it by exchanging addresses with one of the young women. I didn't expect I'd ever hear from her, but stranger things had happened. Vivian Maxwell, for example. I flew home the next evening still thinking about her, wondering if I'd ever hear from her again. Perhaps she was one of those people I was fated to go on meeting for the rest of my life.

It was the following week, after I'd turned in a column on the business aspects of my Mexican journey, that my thoughts turned once again to Vivian Maxwell and her connection with my predecessor Arnold Quain. I went in and talked to Chris Bloch, my editor. "Was Arnold working on anything special before he left?"

Bloch gave me his favorite regretful expression. "How special does it ever get on the travel desk? Special airline fares, special hotel accommodations?"

"Anything about Mexican petroleum? I found a clipping in his file."

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[redacted]o, no—that would be the business desk." The editor frowned [redacted]me. "If you've got a problem, give him a call. You've got the [redacted]number."

Yes, I had the number, but I waited another week before calling it. Maybe I didn't want to hear what he might tell me about Vivian Maxwell. When I did call, his phone was answered by a young woman. "Is this Arnold Quain's desk?"

"Mr. Quain is— May I ask who's calling?"

"Rudy Fine. Arnold used to work here with me."

"Oh!" Her voice took on a somber tone. "You should have been notified. I'm sorry about the slip-up."

"Notified about what?"

"Mr. Quain was killed about a month ago. He was shot in the hallway of his apartment building, apparently by a mugger."

"My God!"

"I'm sorry—" she began again.

"Thank you," I said and hung up.

It was months later, toward the end of May, when a fax arrived at the office addressed to me: *Rudy Fine, I am here in Vegas at the Grand. Come if you can and we'll have a great old time. Vivian.*

3.

It was hot in Las Vegas when my plane landed, but that was no surprise. I took a taxi to the Grand and checked into one of those elaborate rooms with the low nightly rates, designed to let you live in luxury while losing your money. After unpacking I phoned Vivian Maxwell's room but there was no answer. That wasn't surprising. No one traveled to Vegas to spend the afternoons in their room.

I went down to the lobby and strolled into the huge casino, the largest in the city. I circled the floor twice before I spotted her, seated at a high-stakes blackjack table, her purse on her lap, wearing a black cocktail dress that didn't look at all out of place.

"Hello there."

She smiled up at me. "Hello yourself, Rudy Fine."

"Winning much?" I could see by the pile of chips in front of her that she was well ahead of the game.

"Not bad. Stay for two more hands and I'll cash in."

She won on both of them, beating the dealer with a twenty and an eighteen. Then she slid a chip across to him as a tip and put the rest in the side pouch of her purse. "All finished for now."

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I accompanied her to the cashier's window and watched in silent admiration as she collected over ten thousand dollars. Then we went into the dining room. With the time difference I was feeling like an early dinner. "I was surprised to hear from you," I told her as the hostess showed us to a table by the window.

"I told you in Mexico City that I'd write so we could get together. This seemed like a fun time to do it."

"It is," I agreed. "I don't know what my fellow workers thought of that fax you sent me."

She laughed. "Let them wonder."

After dinner I suggested a show, but Vivian hesitated. "I should change into something else. Come up to the room with me."

I had a pretty good idea what that would lead to, but I wasn't fighting it. Her room was larger than mine, with a tall vase of roses on one of the tables. "A gift from an admirer?" I asked.

"From the management, actually. I'm a regular customer."

She pulled the black cocktail dress off over her head and slid the slip down past her hips. She was wearing black pantyhose, with something that looked like a pocket pager taped to the inside of her thigh. "What in hell is that?" I asked. "The latest in autoerotic devices?"

"Hardly!" she answered with a laugh, pulling it from her leg and tossing it into her open suitcase. She made no effort to explain it. "Now come here, Rudy Fine."

We rolled around on the king-size bed, having every bit of the fine old time she'd promised. Evening faded into night, and presently I slept. At one point I awoke in the darkness to the sound of the hall door opening and gently closing. "What—?" I mumbled into the pillow.

"Hush now," she said, sliding in next to me and covering my lips with hers.

In the early morning while she still slept I walked to the window to watch the sun rising over the eastern desert. Down below in the casino parking lot I could see two police cars and an ambulance by the back of a small van. Because I was still a newspaper man I slipped quickly into my shirt and pants and shoes. Vivian had left her key card on the dresser. I dropped it into my pocket and went out quietly, taking the elevator downstairs. I crossed the parking lot to the cluster of vehicles, now joined by a police van from their technical unit. The crackling of police radios filled the early morning silence.

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"What happened?" I asked one of the cops.

"Found a body in the van." The police photographers had apparently finished their work and he held the van door wide as the body was slid onto a gurney. Inside the van I caught a glimpse of a small television monitor and some electronic equipment. Then I saw the body. There was blood on the temple, apparently from a bullet wound. As they slid him out I remembered our only meeting, at a Mexico City bar. The dead man was Vivian's friend, Roberto Azul.

I went back upstairs and let myself into the room. Vivian stirred in the bed and rolled over. "Where were you?" she asked sleepily.

"I got so lucky last night I decided I should try my luck at the slots. Didn't win a thing."

She snorted softly. "Come back to bed."

I didn't tell her about Azul's death, any more than I'd told her the news of Arnold Quain's death. Perhaps I didn't feel she'd want to know about them, or perhaps I thought she already did know.

We spent the day together, though I'd already told her I should be getting back that night. "You flew all the way out here for just one night?" she asked.

"But what a night!"

She laughed, and I liked the sound of that. "There should be more men like you, Rudy Fine."

Later in the day I found a newspaper and read the small item about an unidentified man found murdered in a casino parking lot. Maybe it wasn't that big a story in Vegas, or maybe the police had their own reasons for playing it down. I phoned the airline and had my flight changed to the red-eye back East. Vivian Maxwell was a wonderful young woman, but too many of her friends were dying.

She went with me to the airport and we played the slot machines until my flight was called. "When will I see you again?" she asked.

"I don't know. It's not always this easy to get away at a moment's notice."

"Maybe I'll come to see you. I liked the city when I was there before."

"You never did tell me what you were doing there."

"This and that. I'm a wanderer, but I guess I don't have to tell you that." We kissed at the gate and she said, "I'll call you, Rudy Fine."

I knew that she would. I knew I'd go on seeing her as long as we both lived, for better or worse.

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Back home, back to the routine of the city room and my regular column, I tried not to think about Vivian and what had happened in Las Vegas. I tried it for a week, then I phoned the newspaper in Vegas and asked some discreet questions about the body in the parking lot. I told the man on the city desk it might tie in with something I was working on. The body in the van had been identified as Roberto Azul Fernandez, a Mexican national with arrest records in both countries, mostly for swindles and confidence games. I wondered if he knew what he was getting into when he met Vivian.

"There was electronic equipment in the van," the man on the phone told me. "A short-range transmitter and a TV screen. The police think he was trying some sort of scam at the casino and somebody shot him."

"Makes sense," I agreed. "Look, what's your name? I might want a follow-up later."

"Jeff Donner. Just ask for Jeff."

"Thanks, Jeff. I'm Rudy Fine. I'd appreciate it if you could inform me of any break in the case."

"Will do."

So long as I was checking with newsmen, I decided to try Mexico City. On the phone I got nowhere, partly because of the language difficulty, but a young woman who spoke English promised to send me the daily newspapers for the week I'd been down there back in January. I wanted to see if there was any mention of Vivian Maxwell or Roberto Azul Fernandez.

The woman on the phone hadn't bothered to rush the newspapers and it was two weeks before they finally arrived from Mexico, curled into a fat tube. I carefully removed them and spread them out on my desk. My Spanish was no better than when I'd been down there and I needed help with some of the headlines. A Cuban woman on the staff came to my rescue. "What is it you're looking for?" she asked.

"Something about the winners of the national lottery. It's held every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday night."

We went through the papers page by page. Finally she spotted it. "Right here! It's just a small article. The big winner was a man from Monterrey named Azul. Roberto Azul."

"Thanks, Maria. That's what I wanted. I wish there was a picture, though."

"With three big winners each week they probably stopped running pictures long ago."

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"Let's check the next two papers just in case." I was thinking my Vegas reporter friend would be interested in a picture if there was one. We found no pictures but Maria spotted something two days after the lottery drawing.

"Look at this."

"What does it say?"

" 'Lottery Boy Believed Victim of Street Gang.' One of the boys who draws the winning lottery numbers was found dead near the zoo with his throat cut. The police think he was killed by members of a street gang who live in the hillside caves near Chapultepec Park."

A chill went through me as she read it. "Thanks, Maria. You've been a big help."

The following day I received a call from Jeff Donner, the reporter in Las Vegas. "Remember that killing in the parking lot you phoned me about?"

"I remember, Jeff."

"The police here have issued an arrest warrant for a woman named Vivian Maxwell, whereabouts unknown. They found evidence in the dead man's van linking them to a scheme to defraud the casinos at blackjack games. Apparently she's a prime suspect in his murder."

"Thanks for the information."

"Does the Maxwell name mean anything to you?"

"I may have encountered her, but I have no idea where she might be now."

"If you find anything back there, remember your friendly Vegas tipster. We have to sell papers here, too."

"I'll remember. Thanks, Jeff."

During the weeks that followed I almost dreaded answering the phone when it rang. I was sure she'd contact me sooner or later, and I didn't know what I might do when I heard her voice. As the weeks passed, I thought about it less frequently, and so it was a surprise the afternoon I answered the phone and heard the familiar words.

"Hello, Rudy Fine."

"Well! What have you been up to?"

"Traveling. I'm always traveling."

"Are you in town?"

"I'm at the City Centre Hotel, room two forty-three. Come over if you can."

"Wait right there," I said and hung up.

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The moment I'd been dreading had come. I sat and stared at the telephone for a good five minutes, knowing yet not knowing what I must do. Finally I picked up the phone and called the police.

4.

I didn't attend the trial. I wanted nothing further to do with Vivian Maxwell. She had lost her cool only once, but it had been a fatal loss. The police had verified the outstanding arrest warrant and gone to the hotel to take her into custody. As the first officer entered her room she'd raised her pistol and killed him with a single shot.

Since the case against her was stronger here, the Las Vegas police had yielded jurisdiction to us. She was tried for murder in the killing of the police officer, with the district attorney demanding the death penalty. When the jury found her guilty and the judge sentenced her to death, she did not appeal.

A few months after the trial, as the date of her execution approached, my editor summoned me into his office. "Do you know this Maxwell woman?" he asked.

"I've met her a few times. Why do you ask?"

"I just had a call from the warden at the state prison. She's requested that you be present at her execution as a witness."

"What?"

"You heard me."

I sat down hard. Nothing he could have said would have surprised me more. "She wants me at her execution? For one thing, I'm opposed to capital punishment. My first column—"

"I remember," Chris Bloch told me. "But that has nothing to do with it. As an official witness you can request a visit before the execution. You can interview her. We'll have an exclusive on it. In case you've missed all the media coverage, she'll be the first white woman ever executed in this state."

"I know."

The more I thought about it, perhaps it wasn't so strange. I hadn't appeared at the trial, where she might have expected me. Now was her last chance and she'd taken it, perhaps knowing I wouldn't refuse a condemned woman's last request.

"Will you do it?"

"If she wants to see me, I'll go."

The execution was ten days away, and I could think of little else as the time approached. The state prison was an hour's drive from the city, with the execution scheduled for ten P.M. I arrived early,

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since they'd told me I would have to leave her cell by nine. They searched me with a metal detector and then escorted me down the long bare hallway to death row.

As her cell was unlocked, I said, "Hello, Vivian."

"Hello, Rudy Fine."

I was shocked by her appearance. The blond hair was cut almost to her skull and she'd lost weight. Her eyes seemed sunken into her head. "I only came because you asked," I told her. "I didn't want to see you like this."

She smiled without showing her teeth. It was a sad smile. "But you put me here. They told me you gave the police my room number at the hotel."

I sat down on the hard bunk by her. "It was the most difficult thing I've ever done."

"Then why—?"

"I knew about Roberto Azul. You went downstairs and shot him while I was asleep. I heard you come back in."

"Roberto was a fool, a petty criminal. I introduced him to big-time money and then he wanted to keep it all for himself."

"Tell me about him."

"I met him through that Lake Zacatel deal. We were trying to get investors for a resort. It was mostly a scam, but your friend Arnold Quain messed me up. He was too honest for his own good. I actually think he moved to New York to get away from me, but with your help I tracked him down."

"My help?"

"You told me where he was working. That was why I came to your paper in the first place—not for any research, just to find Arnold. I flew to Mexico City to tell Azul the Zacatel deal was off, then we drove up to Vegas together. He had some gadgets he wanted to try out. One was a tiny closed-circuit television system. The camera was small enough to fit in my purse, with only the lens protruding. I kept it on my lap, pointed at the cards as they were dealt. Roberto watched from the van on the closed-circuit screen, counting the cards and doing some calculations. He sent me a signal using that pager taped to my thigh. It gave a little tickle that told me when to take a hit. I won two-thirds of the hands, a nice profit, and it didn't attract attention."

"Why'd you kill him? Just because he wanted the money for himself?"

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"He was too demanding. He wanted more than just a business deal. When he found out I'd faxed you a message he was furious. I woke up that night and heard my pager beeping. He wanted to see me down in the van, so I went down."

"Had you slept with him?"

"Yes."

"And Arnold Quain?"

"I slept with all of them! Does that satisfy you?"

I ignored her outburst and said, "Tell me about you and Roberto in Mexico City."

"What about it?"

"He won the National Lottery."

She shrugged. "He was a lucky man."

"Not always. The lottery was rigged, wasn't it?"

"How would you rig a lottery like that?"

"By tempting one of the boys that draw the numbers from the revolving cage. By taking him to the zoo in Chapultepec Park and by teaching him a little sleight of hand so he could palm the small numbered ball that came out of the chute and substitute another that he'd been given—one whose number matched the lottery ticket Roberto Azul already possessed."

She shrugged. "Perhaps."

"The boy died two days later, Vivian. His throat was cut in the park."

"That was Azul's doing."

"I doubt it. He wouldn't want to be seen with the boy so soon after winning the lottery. Besides, it was you who won his confidence, you who met him in the park and took him to the zoo. He wouldn't be afraid of you."

She stood up, ignoring my words. "You're a newsman. Tell me about this execution. Lethal injection. They strap you down and run an intravenous tube into your arm. You get tranquilizers at first, and then the executioner pushes a button and a lethal dose of poison is fed into the line. Is that the way it is?"

"Pretty much."

"I won't feel anything?"

"No." I glanced at my watch. "I'll have to leave shortly."

"Time for one last question?"

"From me or from you?"

"Both of us," she responded. "You first."

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"Why didn't you appeal the death sentence? There's a good chance the courts or the governor would have changed it to life in prison."

"It's better this way," she said.

"What's your question?"

"Why didn't you come to the trial? I looked for you every day."

"I don't know. Maybe I was worried about what happened to Azul, and what almost happened to me. You already had your gun out when that first cop came through the door. That's how you got the shot off so quick. But you weren't expecting the cops. You were expecting me. Was I another loose end you came back to take care of, like Quain and Azul and the boy in the park?"

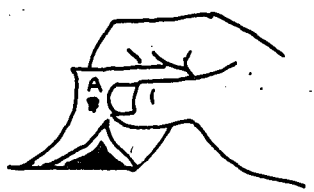
The guard returned to the cell door. "Time's up," he said.

I got to my feet. I hadn't really expected her to answer. Then, as I went out the cell door, I heard her voice one last time.

"Write a column for me, Rudy Fine."

"I'll do that," I promised.

Later, that midnight, I went back to the office and sat down at my word processor. I tried not to think of the boy in Chapultepec Park as I wrote my second column opposing capital punishment.



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THE INCREDULITY OF BR. FANEWORTH

by H. T. GREENSTOCK

Four people sat talking in the drawing room of a London house. The atmosphere was strained by a powerful uneasiness, which the cheerful fire, and the even more cheerful visitors, failed to dispel. Two of the people lived in the house, and it was from them, and especially from the wife, that the uneasiness emanated.

"It's supposed to be an extraordinary painting," said the husband, who went by the name of Dan Kammer and was a well-known expert on paintings and their history.

"That's not the point," said his wife, who was a remarkable woman with a startling beauty, called, for some reason, Anabel Row. "Di Mechio means you no good, and never did. Br. Faneworth, don't you agree?"

The little friar, thus appealed to, shook his head. "I'm afraid I couldn't say, not knowing the man, but I can see he makes you very anxious."

"I *do* know him," the lady asserted, "and that is why I am anxious. Still, Dan, I know you are determined to see this unusual painting, so go ahead, but please hurry back. It's amazing, the number of pictures he has found for you to look at lately. But he has not done you any harm yet, so perhaps I am wrong."

With that, Kammer departed, offering assurance that Di Mechio was all right, but there was something in his voice that was perhaps a little overhearty.

Anabel Row continued to express her worries to her guests, who were, to look at, a strange pair. The friar was short, dumpy, and insignificant-looking, clad in the shapeless garb of his order. His companion, who was very tall, was a detective who had previously been a famous criminal, called Balfaumé. Br. Faneworth had been

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instrumental both in his ending the one career and beginning the other, and they were often together. The friar was a friend of the Kammers', and they had called to consult Kammer in connection with a case of art forgery Balfaumé was working on.

"Di Mechio is a strange man," said the lovely lady, "and, I think, an evil one. We have seen nothing of him for years. Just lately he has struck up an acquaintance with my husband, which seems very odd."

When an hour and part of another had gone by, she could not contain her agitation any longer, and the others offered to walk over to meet her husband and bring him home. Her gratitude was heartfelt, and the two friends set out.

The address they were given proved to be a gloomy old house with a disconsolate and semi-neglected air. They rang the bell and could hear it pealing within, but no one came to the door.

"Anabel Row is not a fanciful woman," said Br. Faneworth. "I am most awfully afraid that we should have come sooner to look for Kammer." They waited a few minutes longer, and then the friar found a path leading round the house, and started down it.

A giant of a man suddenly appeared on the path, coming round from the back, and stopped when they greeted him. His bushy grey hair was disarranged, and he was breathing hard. His eyes rolled wildly and he seemed in the grip of a powerful fear.

"You won't believe this," he cried, "but come and see. I don't know who you are, but I am sure Providence has sent me a man of God just when I need one more than I am ever liable to in my whole life.

"No, wait," he cried, waving his arms. "Perhaps I'd better tell you first, as you are in for a horrible shock. I still can hardly believe it, though it's happened three times.

"Did you see in the papers last week the report of a strange find in Sussex?"

"No," said Br. Faneworth and Balfaumé together.

"My task would be easier if you had," said the other, fixing his gaze somewhere to their left. "The newspaper article described a cottage that was found full of stone figures in unexpected postures. One, that of a child, was broken into fragments. No one knew how they got there. There was no sign of the occupants of the cottage, who strangely resembled the figures. They had sublet it for the summer, and its owner could not be located. That was all that appeared in the papers, but I happen to know a good deal more about it.

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"Perhaps, though, I should go back to what was, for me, the beginning. My hobby—my passion, even—used to be the collection of artistic oddities—the stranger the better. I gave it up at one time—because of an affliction—but have lately been persuaded to take it up again. In the earlier period, I had come across a report in a twelfth-century manuscript written by an Italian monk. He mentioned a painting that turned all who gazed on it to stone—like the Gorgon's head of old. Now I believe, along with Hamlet, that there are more things on Heaven and earth than are dreamt of in our philosophy, but I was not inclined to take this old monk too seriously. I thought he might have been afflicted with an overactive imagination, or perhaps someone who had seen the painting had afterward been paralysed, or become cold-hearted, and 'turned to stone' was metaphorical. But the tale of a painting that turns men to stone crops up again in the fourteenth century, in France this time, and once in the fifteenth in England. Each time, the painting was supposedly buried, the people being too superstitiously fearful to destroy it. A kind of confirmation is that the painting is never described—as if no one who has seen it could afterward say anything about it.

"Gentlemen, I have that painting! I had advertised a description of the wrappings with which my researches had supplied me, in the archaeological journals—along with a strong, even melodramatic, warning not to open it. I implied something inside that was poison to the touch—for the protection of whoever might discover it. Imagine my excitement when I received a reply from an archaeologist who was digging in Sussex. I arranged to meet him at the small cottage he had taken there with his family. When I arrived, I knocked and called, but there was no reply. I went in, and found what the journalists have described—but unlike them, I understood it. The unexpected postures—for statues—were the natural positions of people suddenly transfixed without warning. The child that broke had been caught off balance. The pity of human curiosity—like Pandora's box. It got the whole family. On an easel in a corner, as I have since tragically confirmed, was my painting! I wrapped it in newspaper and stowed it under my coat. I reported as much as I dared to the authorities, who would make nothing of it, and came home.

"Now, I live here with my brother Horbert, and we are somewhat reclusive, myself especially, because of the affliction I mentioned. At any rate, he was inclined to doubt my interpretation of my senses,

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and demanded to see the painting. In fact, he snatched it from me and unwrapped it on the spot. We have exchanged no words since, for the very good reason—" Di Mechio's voice broke in a sob, but he recovered and went on, "—for the very good reason that he too had turned to stone. Here, I'll show you," and he wheeled abruptly on the path toward a side door.

"Wait," he turned back. "There is one other thing. You must be wondering why I wasn't affected by the painting. The answer is simple. I am blind, and have been for many years."

He groped for the door, while Br. Faneworth and Balfaumé thought of that wild unfocussed gaze, and led them into a bare room that was dominated by a still, chill figure which bore a strong familial resemblance to the man who showed it to them. Balfaumé gingerly reached out a hand to it. "It's stone right enough," he muttered.

"I never thought it would be anything else," nodded the friar. "You tell an amazing story, sir, and I suppose there is more to come. You mention three times. I dread to hear what you will say next."

"And I hate to say it," said the huge man. "I have a friend, Dan Kammer, who is an art expert. He had heard of the painting as I had, and nothing would satisfy him but to see for himself. I tried to dissuade him, but these sceptics are arrogant in their scepticism. Not like you," he said to the friar. "You know better."

"I know better than to be a believer," agreed Br. Faneworth, "and that is a great help in knowing what to believe."

"Yes," said Di Mechio, "but my friend was a sceptic, and therefore a fool. He was offensive in his insistence and his scoffing. I could still hardly believe myself what I had seen, and I must confess that a horrible fascination came over me to see if it would work again. I told myself he was asking for it and deserved the consequences, if any. In short, I showed him the painting. I wish I hadn't," he added simply, and led the way out of the house and round to the garden.

Balfaumé felt the hairs prickle on his scalp, but Br. Faneworth only fixed his weak gaze upon the transformation of the man who had so recently been their host. For there, in solid stone, stood Dan Kammer.

"This is terrible!" exclaimed Balfaumé.

"Yes," agreed the friar sadly, "murder is always terrible."

"Murder!" cried the detective. "I suppose you could call it that, and the wife hinted at an old enmity, which may have made Dan

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Kammer a marked man. But if Di Mechio murdered him with the painting, who's to prove it in a court of law?"

"That's not what I meant," said Br. Faneworth. "It seems I am often misunderstood. I am talking about ordinary, or garden variety, murder. Watch out!"

For the blind man was lunging straight at them—whether to attack or escape was never clear. The detective overpowered him, for he had a wiry strength that was more than a match for the other's great bulk, and was no small man himself. They tied him securely and called the police.

"Though what you will tell them, I don't know," grumbled Balfaumé. "You seem to understand this a good deal better than I."

"I'd better explain," said the friar. "It's surprising how often these clever men make the same mistake. They think that if I believe in my religion, I'll believe in anything else. I don't deny that impossible things can happen, but I do deny that this impossible thing happened. I saw the truth instead, and he knew I saw it."

"Then how do you explain this?" Balfaumé gestured toward the immobile Kammer. "And the newspaper article about the family in Sussex?"

"You don't understand yet," said the other. "I don't explain it, for it never happened. There is no such family and no such newspaper article—except in the invention of Di Mechio. That goes for the medieval manuscripts as well."

"But we saw two men turned to stone with our own eyes."

"We saw two statues," said Br. Faneworth firmly. "Made, as statues usually are, by a sculptor. The brother, I fancy. That room is his studio, and I suppose he had done a self-portrait in stone. Artists are fond of self-portraits, whether from egotism or the accessibility of the model I have never quite determined, though I daresay it's a combination of the two.

"As for Kammer, you remember his wife saying he often came here lately? It must have been to have himself sculpted as a surprise for her, since the statue is here, and she didn't know why he came. He came for sittings, but he told her he was coming to look at paintings—as Di Mechio knew and utilized so ingeniously. I should imagine, by the way, that their quarrel was over Kammer's wife. She has told me that she was once engaged to another man, whose brother was a sculptor, but broke it off to marry Kammer. She found him frightening even then.

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"Di Mechio apparently never got over it. With Kammer here so often, he needed only bide his time for an opportunity to kill him—whether he lured him here originally by suggesting the sculpture, or the arrangement was made independently between Kammer and Horbert. His chance came today, when the brother was absent from the house—unless he has murdered him too. He invented his whole story on the spur of the moment, when he heard us at the front door looking for Kammer—to gain time for himself and a chance to escape, and prevent us searching for Kammer where we might find him. If I hadn't let him know I saw through it, I think he would have offered to fetch the painting, and that's the last we'd have seen of him.

"After he heard us at the door, he hurried to the studio and shoved the sculptor's gear into cupboards, so we wouldn't think of sculpture in connection with stone men. Then he hauled the second statue out into the garden—there is another door at the back—and came up the path to meet us. He was out of breath from moving the statue, and perhaps also from burying Kammer's body in the garden, as I think he was doing before we came. There is some soil there that looks very freshly dug.

"But he overreached himself. He had to explain why the painting hadn't turned *him* to stone, and invented his affliction. But I knew that was false, and then saw how the rest was used to cover up a murder."

"All right," said the detective, "how did you know he wasn't blind?"

"Why, how could a blind man tell at a distance that I was a man of God?

"Besides," said the friar, "his name clearly revealed him for what he was and what he did. Think about it."

AUTHOR'S NOTE: What Br. Faneworth means is that Di Mechio anagrams to "homicide." For this is another anagram pastiche, and Br. Faneworth himself is better known as Father Brown. His frequent associate, Balfaumé, whom Father Brown at one time captured and influenced so that he ended his criminal career, is actually called Flambeau.

Other anagrams:

Dan Kammer—marked man
Anabel Row (Kammer)—remarkable woman
Horbert—brother

And the author, H. T. Greenstock—creator of Father Brown, and one of the all-time greats—G. K. Chesterton.

EDITOR'S NOTE: The real author of this story is Norma Schier.

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a ***NEW*** short story by

JEFFRY SCOTT

Always a favorite with our readers, Jeffry Scott placed in the top ten in the 1993 Readers Award competition with his story "No Gift from the Magi" (Mid-December, 1993). Here's another that's sure to please . . .

IN THE ABSENCE OF THE LADIES

by JEFFRY SCOTT

That summer there was no more Barbara, and in the same key, my cousin Flynn's wife died.

We'd always done things together, he and I, though seldom in company, for our families lived fifty miles apart. As boys, we broke our arms at either end of the same week in accidents involving tree-climbing and a bicycle, respectively. Late in our teens I went into the army and Flynn joined the air force, though both of us might have cheated on the National Service conscription of that era. I saw a chance for free travel, he preferred military service to years more at "grownups school," as Flynn termed university.

While growing up and moving into young adulthood, I became resigned, as I expect Flynn did, to this . . . well, mirror imaging would be pitching it too high, but there was an element of mutual echoes. My mother and his exchanged regular letters. So many times Mum would look up from a slim sheaf of blue writing paper to exclaim, "You'll never guess what Ronnie has been up to!" but there was no need to guess: my cousin had done something that I had done, or was planning to do. Gradually I embroidered a fantasy that we were locked in an eternal race, Flynn and me. Except that there was no competitive element and the winner's tape was hardly worth breasting—an impacted wisdom tooth for me, while Flynn escaped

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with a brace; he nagged his parents into letting him make money with a paper round, I started breeding and selling guinea pigs, and so it went.

We were not close, as youngsters. There was a lot of visiting back and forth—Mum proposing, "Let's have a run in the car," tone suggesting that she had never said such a thing before, and Dad would wink at me, marking the silent joke that we always went to see the Flynns. And joint holidays were taken over the years. At such times Ronnie and I got on all right, but the relationship's strongest quality was mild relief on both sides: the other kid could have been worse. We were only-children, a bit spoilt and timid, and perhaps a bit old for our age. When Ronnie Flynn showed me his toy cars, many, many cars, it never occurred to me to vroom-vroom them along the nearest flat surface, or propose swopping one for whatever barterable object I had with me at the time. When I showed him my air rifle, Flynn did not want to fire it. We had our own lives, repeatedly similar or no, and they satisfied us. Loners, we were willing to be thrown together, yet failed to be enthused by it.

We must have been nondescript, mediocre children. I completed school without getting a nickname and Flynn was made a prefect at his. Long afterwards, a man who'd been to Flynn's school explained that prefects there had been nonentities who were acceptable to teachers and therefore, almost by definition, less well liked by their peers; Flynn had been among this man's contemporaries but he couldn't put a face to my cousin's name.

After Flynn's mother died and mine ran away with a double-glazing salesman (ever afterwards my father's abiding sense of humour forced him to tell any new acquaintance, "And the bloody patio doors have never worked right, talk about adding insult to injury") the link ceased to exist, along with the families it had connected.

Sometimes, especially when things were going badly, I wondered whether my cousin was suffering much the same plight, or remained unaware of its imminent arrival. That cheered me up, in a harmlessly malicious, misery-loves-companionship manner. And if times were good—Barbara was incredible in bed, during our early days—I speculated over what form Flynn's blessings had taken. It never struck me that I could find out, simply by getting back in touch with him.

Some twenty years passed before we encountered each other in my local supermarket. He was fatter and wore glasses, no doubt I

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was thinner and had less hair, yet recognition was instant. "What are you doing here?" we asked in chorus, and answered the same way, half resentful, half amused: "I live here."

It turned out that Flynn had moved to Garham Forest in the 1980s when his firm joined the panic flight from London's absurd rents and penal taxes. We must have been missing each other by moments for years on end. That sort of thing fascinates me far more than outrageous coincidences.

The usual so-whatish quality of such meetings (it's however many years, big deal, but what to talk about next?) evaporated because we both made terrible gaffes and were intent on assuring each other that apologies were needless, think no more of it. . . . Flynn had cocked an eye at my wire basket and smiling rather snidely, remarked, "You never married, then. That's a bachelor basket if ever I saw one."

"Actually my wife has just left me."

Once we'd smoothed that over, nervous jollity made me say, "Takes one to know one, your basket's unmarried as well."

"She died six months ago."

Then, mercifully, he laughed—not callously, but at my expression. It came to me that I had no memory of Flynn laughing when we were boys or young men. So I laughed too, and we ended up in the pub next to the mall.

He couldn't see it, and for that matter I never raised the suggestion, but we were still on the same track. It was more than losing our women. Some people get over that and I suspect that surprisingly many are covertly delighted. Neither of us fitted that category, we were not doing well in the aftermath.

A few days later Flynn asked me round for a meal at his place. "Sorry," he mumbled as I followed him down the hall, "house is a bit of a mess."

"Mine is as bad." But only just, I might have added. Washing had been hung up to dry from the picture rails in the spare bedroom, I noticed when I went upstairs to use the bathroom. The food Flynn produced was pretty foul, though not dangerous to health, just microwaved muck from packets. Things perked up with dessert. Ice cream is ice cream, can't be ruined, bar total melting before hitting the bowl.

After we washed up, Flynn using one of those old-fashioned dishmops, floppy worms on a stick, which I found bone-achingly sad somehow, we had coffee in the lounge. It was the tidiest room,

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evidently dusted regularly, though he hadn't picked anything up from mantelshelf or sideboard first, so there were shiny, labyrinth patterns around the ornaments. A small pile of envelopes bearing Christmas stamps sat on a coffee table, pinning down a things-to-do list in female writing. Buy turkey, check tree lights . . . One knew that his dead wife had been denied the right to post those letters, obey the reminders, and now he couldn't bear to throw the stuff away. Nonreligious shrines can be devastatingly poignant.

Remind me to come again soon, I thought, say the twenty-second century.

But in the end it wasn't bad, lots of catching up to do. However, he had caught my glance at the unposted cards, for suddenly Flynn said, "I blame myself, that's the terrible thing, Dick. She'd been ill for a long time, you see . . . various ailments, minor really, one after the other. I got used to it: if anything, tell the truth and shame the devil, I was irritated. 'Oh no, what now?' as if Sheila did it on purpose, poor girl. If I hadn't been used to it, I might have realised what was happening, that it was serious—"

"You're not a doctor, Ronnie."

"I suppose not." If he started crying, I was out of there. Instead we had a drink and another drink and then I shot out to the nearest off-license for another bottle and we played chess until two in the morning. It ended up as a surprisingly pleasant night.

He came round to my place the following week. I tried to keep him out of the kitchen; a couple of weeks after Barbara's abrupt departure I'd cleaned the oven, to prove what a disgusting slut she had been, removing the lining to do a thorough job. Then I couldn't get it back in again. Didn't matter, since I nuked whatever stuff absolutely had to be hot, and ate a lot of salads and fresh fruit. Better for you.

Flynn fixed the oven in five minutes, but when I tried to explain the washing machine to him—his was near enough the same model—he shook his head ruefully. "I seem to be dyslexic with those things. Send my shirts to the laundry, and the sheets. The rest I rinse through in the bathroom, works fine."

I explained how unlucky we were. For centuries until our generation, men alone expected and bellowed for female relatives or neighbours to keep the housework in order. Unless they could afford servants. But that wasn't on anymore. The one woman I had dated since Barbara talked my ear off about sexism when I asked for advice on chores. I suppose she would have called the police if invited

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to whisk a wet rag over the kitchen floor. . . . Flynn said yes, that was about right. His son, pushing thirty, was a feckless ninny who couldn't keep a job, but his flat was always immaculate and he was a terrific cook, button-sewer-onner, turner of mattresses.

"Make somebody a good wife," Flynn grumbled. "Not that he's queer, Jack, don't get the wrong idea."

"Gay," I said. "The other is Politically Incorrect."

"Can't have that," he agreed. "And I love the lad, really. It's just that all those years I worried over his future and it turns out he's better equipped to deal with life than I am."

Then we played some more chess.

Still, it was not friendship between us. More, convenience. Time passes faster when there's something to look forward to every week. And at least I wasn't talking to myself. Though for most of the time one might just as well have been. Small talk is an overstatement, our conversation, such as "Check" followed by "Not for long," or "Fancy one for the road?" and observations on the state of the weather, was minuscule.

Probably Flynn sensed that a pinch more grieving widower stuff and he'd be playing chess on his own. I'm unsure whether he flinched from asking about Barbara to spare a deserted husband's feelings, or simply wasn't interested. Bereavement can make one self-centered.

I couldn't help thinking that if our histories were set to unfold in tandem, then I was in for a great rest of my life. After his wife had been dead for more than a year, Flynn was downcast and lost as ever. But then so was I, in a slightly different fashion. "At least you've got a cat," he said one night, shrugging into his topcoat as the thing raced past him. "I'd like to have a pet, but the company sends me out of town so often. Wouldn't work. Ah well . . . g'night, Jack."

I pondered over that, when he'd gone. Chang was Barbara's cat, and he had only just stopped wandering the house, sniffing around unlikely places, as if hoping to find Barbara in the coal scuttle or hiding behind the stem of the ficus tree. He let me feed him, in the sense of allowing me to set the stuff down and make myself scarce. If I lingered, Chang's eyes turned cold and his tail twitched impatiently for privacy.

Poor cat, so lonely. And I was lonelier than the cat.

Sufficiently lonely to talk back at the TV, some nights. One particular anchorman drove me to four-letter heckling every night. Lonely

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enough to look forward to seeing Flynn. Clear me of self-pity, I'm stating a fact.

Why not find another woman then? Ah . . . Once bitten, and all that. Only for me it is twice bitten, for Barbara was my second wife. Mature men, divorced or widowed, will tell you how awful it is to get back to the girl-chasing and courtship routine. Just as tedious and demeaning as resuming any other callow activity—skateboarding, collecting pictures of sports stars—when one happens to be more than half a century old.

The ordeal is familiar enough to be a cliché. I endured it once, in my forties, to get Barbara. Undergoing all that yet again was intolerable. Besides, my first marriage ended in bitterness and finishing with Barbara was far, far worse. Obviously I am no good at partnership. Finding a third mate only to lose her with God knows what level of drama would be more than I could stand. The risk terrified me.

Since our temperaments as well as our lives were similar, I assumed that Flynn felt the same way. Never assume. . . .

There's a decent little health-food restaurant near my office. The great and arguably only advantage about Garham Forest is that the business district is small enough for everything to be within walking distance. I was doing the *Telegraph* crossword and waiting for my vegetarian hot-pot when somebody slapped the paper against my nose and exclaimed, "You never told me Ronnie Flynn is related to you!"

Typical Constance Gardiner. Dreadful woman, all teeth and flashing spectacles and affectations. Practical jokes of Neanderthal simplicity—like startling me and ripping a paper I still hadn't read—irk me at the best of times and, sexist it may be, but female clowns are harder to take than male buffoons. Until knowing her well enough to dislike her, I'd been embarrassed on Constance's behalf, willing her to shut up and stop behaving so childishly.

I'd never been able to declare my embarrassment or disapproval, because we worked for the same firm. Gardiner was three floors away in Foreign Exchange, thank goodness.

"He's such a sweetie," she brayed, making the restaurant go quiet, and me cringe. "You're such a cold fish, Jack. Can't believe you and Ronnie belong to the same clan." And off she clumped, glowing at attracting attention. Not to mention bragging, far from obliquely, that the wretched Flynn was captive of her bow and spear.

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When I tackled him about it, his reply came perilously close to making me hit him.

"Jack, it won't make any difference to us, there'll always be time for you. It'll be better, if anything, when I can welcome you to a proper home instead of a dump."

"I have plenty of friends!" I lied.

Flynn became defensive. "Oh, I get it. You think it's too soon, hardly a year since Sheila passed over."

"What you do is your business. But Connie Gardiner . . . "

"What about her?" Flynn couldn't glower, wrong face for it, but he pouted. I just looked at him until he grinned reluctantly, conceding. "I suppose she is a bit, you know, assertive."

"One way of putting it. And she is on her best behaviour at present. Why d'you think her husband ditched her? He couldn't stand living with the worst kind of petty tyrant."

"That's a bit strong," he said sulkily.

"No, it's a bit true. Wholly so, in fact. Okay, you want someone to come home to at night, in a welcoming house. Hire a housekeeper. Getting lumbered with an overgrown schoolgirl like Connie is a heavy price to pay for home comforts. She's not even attractive. Barbara was a queen bitch, but at least she was decorative. While she lasted. Do you truly dream of waking up to Connie Gardiner every morning?"

He was abstracted during the rest of the evening's chess games, an ideal opponent whom I bested twice running. An hour or so later, while I mulled over a move, he said, "To be honest, I'm not sure whether it is loneliness or lack of comfort that gets me down. But it would be daft to make big decisions in a hurry."

No more was heard of Constance Gardiner. Lord knows how he'd met her—in the supermarket, more than likely. I didn't ask, preferring to leave the subject closed.

It would have been a couple of months later that Flynn mentioned the Lagonda. He was still a bore about cars, exotic ones in particular; I tuned out most of his automotive prattle. On this occasion I listened, since he was showing me a snapshot of what looked to be scrap-heap. "I saw her in a chap's backyard last week. Luckily he doesn't know what he's got, I can get it for five hundred pounds."

"That's what he pays you to take it away?"

"Very funny, Jack. If only I had the space, I'd buy it like a shot. Always wanted to restore a car. It would take me years, and round here, the kids would smash it up faster than I was getting it back

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into shape." He lived in a middle-of-terrace house, parking outside in the street like the rest of his neighbours.

"I know of a lock-up garage going cheap. It's out in the wilds, mind you, take you a quarter-hour to drive there."

"How cheap is cheap?"

"Sixty quid a year is what I pay." Anticipating his question, I said hastily, "Long story, Barbara's kid brother, the rolling stone, stored a load of furniture in our garage while he was between flats. Promised to shift the stuff in a week, then took himself off to Thailand. That was a year ago. I moved the stuff to this place when I got tired of leaving the car out in the snow."

Flynn wrinkled his nose. "Can't be much of a garage for only a quid a week, near enough." His mother had been just the same, irking my mother with her nitpicking ways. Do him a favour and he raised objections.

"It's perfectly adequate," I said shortly. "More of a shed, really, plenty of room. You know those small holdings on the Yarrow road? The one at the crossroads, Yew Tree Farm, has these war-surplus army huts in a field. Idea was to raise battery chickens in them, but it never happened."

"Would they let me have one, d'you think?"

"No chance, that's why I told you. Of course he will. Bill Marson's the farmer, I've moonlighted on his accounts for years. If you like, I'll give him a ring, see if he's got any room left. You may have to clear out some old hay bales or whatever."

"At a quid a week, I'll rebuild the place." Flynn rubbed his hands. "Thanks, Jack, it's worth investigating. Yes, give him a bell."

Isn't there a saying about no good deed going unpunished?

I phoned Bill Marson, explaining what Flynn needed. "That'll be fine, Mr. Jackson. I restored an MG a few years back, always regret selling it. Still got a lot of gear, compressor, arc-welding kit and that. Your cousin's welcome to the use of them. No sign of your brother-in-law, I suppose? Still out in foreign parts, is he?"

Marson thought it a prime joke that I had to pay him rent, albeit a nominal sum, to regain the use of my own garage.

"No sign," I agreed. "When's the best time for Ronnie to see you, Bill?"

"Umm . . . I'm on holiday from tomorrow. Tell him to come and have a look anytime. Dad's looking after the place while we're away." Bill Marson cleared his throat. "Dad's a bit deaf and not as young as he was. Likely to show any strangers his shotgun and sling

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them off the property. But he knows you—better tell Mr. Flynn to mention your name, and shout up when he does it, else he might have a wasted journey."

So that was what Flynn did the following weekend.

And it is why I am on remand in custody, awaiting trial for murder.

Hard to say what doomed me. My know-all side, impelling me to tell Flynn about a cheap lock-up garage? The accident of birth introducing us to each other so long ago? The law of averages, decreeing that after countless trips to the supermarket, I finally met him again? If he had dithered three seconds longer over frozen dinners for one, or I had turned left by the pet food instead of going straight ahead towards the checkouts, I might still be free. It hardly bears thinking about.

On earnest reflection, euphemisms are the true culprit. Had Bill Marson acknowledged that his father—whom I hadn't seen for several years—was senile, rather than deaf and feeble, I might have insisted on accompanying Flynn to inspect the garage. Probably not, though.

Spilt milk: Flynn went to Yew Tree Farm, roared at the old fellow that he was expected, that he was the prospective tenant vouched for by Mr. Jackson. Mr. JACK—SON! The dotard nodded vigorously, selected a key from the row of hooks on the kitchen dresser, and insisted on leading Flynn along the lane and unlocking the shed. Not one of the vacant sheds, but Mr. Jackson's. My shed, which he took to be the required one.

The furniture was there, bought from a thrift shop to back up my story for Farmer Marson's benefit. And so was my Barbara, lying on a broken-backed couch, just as she had been since three days after I choked the wretched woman to death.

I do not regret my action, only its effect on me. Ill must be spoken of the dead: she was a shrew. I might have been able to handle her nagging, had there been an end in view: for me to earn more, sleep or not sleep with her, whatever. Instead, Barbara was inimical and treated me to constant, escalating tirades, without disclosing what was wrong with me.

It might have been everything, come to think of it. Simply the abiding *me* of me. I never did find out; there is no reasoning with an unreasonable person. Though there are means to shut them up.

Heigh-ho, at least I won't be lonely in prison.

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Flynn came to see me, asked my lawyer to arrange it. "You must hate me," he faltered. "I mean, it's the last thing I would have wanted to . . . when I called the police, it never crossed my mind that you . . . that it was anything to do with you, Jack."

"If you had known, you'd have kept quiet," I suggested innocently.

. The chump took that at face value, shaking his head. "How could you? Killing was bad enough, but the way you treated her afterwards . . . Jesus, I'll never forget it."

He perceived me as a monster, not so much because I killed Barbara when her wicked mouth ran away with her, but for not chopping her up and strewing her in ditches, or hiding her to decompose underground. Storing her away in heat-sealed, heavy-duty plastic sheeting was horrific. I wanted to shake him, shouting that dead is dead and the physical debris is irrelevant. (But inconvenient, no question. Hence my need to hire a tomb at sixty pounds a year.)

Only my lawyer and psychiatrist visit now.

Days later, I was still thinking about my cousin. Had the pattern broken at last? For some reason the concept was disturbing. It was a line scored right across a page of the ledger of my life—confirmation that my offense was great enough to set me apart from ordinary people in an ordinary world. It was not Flynn whom I missed, but the pattern that I mourned for.

Until it came to me . . .

He'd had a haircut and was wearing a new suit. The tie was garish and unsuitable, exactly the tie that a woman buys for a man. None of that was for my benefit.

Flynn had found another woman, who was taking him in hand, the way they will. No, not another woman, the previous one. Obnoxious Constance Gardiner was back in the picture, taking advantage of my downfall to renew her campaign. Except that knowing Flynn, it was worse than that: probably he had renewed the chase. I was a murderer, my advice was worthless.

It was illogical enough to make me chuckle. I'd put my victim in an airtight pouch and tried, not very successfully, to forget about her. Therefore the warning Flynn had heeded, not long ago, could be ignored. He was such a fool.

I feel ever so much better now. Quite eager for the trial to be over so that the rest of my life may commence.

It is . . . *all right.* The pattern is inviolate, supreme. Flynn will marry Constance, or rather she will capture him, I am convinced. Both of us will forfeit our liberty—and I have the best of it. For consider: Ronnie has done nothing to deserve his sentence. ●

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HARDOUIN AND THE MONSTERS

by BEN PASTOR

Archbishop Hardouin had been a very fit man. Twenty years after riding to hounds for the last time, he maintained bulk if not vigor, but altogether he was strong and resilient for a priest.

He looked around the roomful of concerned faces, most of them young and pitilessly shorn, and with a tap of his hefty ring on the table, he startled the first row.

"So, you're all afraid. Is that it?"

A murmur of embarrassed half-voiced denials followed, which only one of those present expressed.

"There are things that defy nature, Domine Archbishop. The saints tell us to beware of them."

"Fear of God is the only fear *I* was taught. The *Other One* has to be dealt with. Our Lord was not afraid when he was conveyed to the summit and shown the kingdoms of the earth."

"With all respect"—the man who had spoken was in his twenties, blue-eyed and pale where his hair had been cut on the temples and neck, but sun-red everywhere else—"the archbishop has not seen what we saw."

"Tell me what you saw, then."

"Why, the man was strangled with his own shirt, and his monsters lay around him."

Hardouin paid no attention to the comments and rolling of eyes that went with the statement.

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"Alteville, you're a well-born crusader—what do you mean by monsters?"

"The bottled ones, Domine Archbishop, kept in pickle."

"In pickle, no less. Well, indeed! Monsters, eh? Do you want me as priest, then, or to help you find who killed the man?"

"We're just soldiers," Alteville put forth for the rest, crossing himself devoutly. "Righteous killing is one thing, and murder's another, especially when there's evil at play. We beg Your Grace to see for himself whether the one or the other of his virtues is needed here."

When they walked out of the palace, the dusty streets of Antioch had more flies than children. Swarms of both followed Hardouin, even though he wore common clothes and no more resembled a friar than Alteville, who scowled at his side in the hard-beating sunshine.

"The house is at the corner, Domine Archbishop."

They passed under an archway that cast an all too brief shadow upon them, then Alteville stopped.

"I've seen enough of it," he excused himself. "A guard will let Your Grace in."

Inside coolness and an aromatic odor greeted Hardouin, who closed the door at once in order to be alone, and gave his eyes time to grow accustomed to the dimmer light.

Chasid ben Asher lay on the stone floor with a linen shirt wrapped tightly around his neck, looking as dead a Jew as Hardouin had seen in the unhappy days of his fighting. Around the man, Alteville's *monsters* also lay, doubled up or extended, fists tightly closed and tails curled up, soon to decay now that the protective pickle had been spilled. Fragments of glass from their broken jars bristled on the flagstones of the floor. On the marble table by which ben Asher had fallen, powders and ground-up substances still sat in little cups. All seemed in order, but for a large red stain that marred the marble top and had trickled to the tiles below.

Hardouin stepped over the glass fragments to touch and smell the stain, lightly wiping his fingers on the shirt around ben Asher's neck before loosening the knot that had choked life out of him.

When he emerged at last in the street, a thin layer of sweat lined Alteville's scowling face as he stood planted in the sun to wait for Hardouin's return.

Hardouin said to the guard, "Have someone of his people come retrieve his body and give him a decent burial according to his faith." Turning to Alteville, he added, "I saw nothing as dread as the young gentleman gave me to believe. The man was killed, and

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we shall look into that, but had you stayed a moment longer to look at things you would have seen them under their true light."

"Domine Archbishop, who has ever seen such loss of blood from a man who was strangled?"

"It was a loss not of blood but cinnabar, Alteville, such as dancing girls daub on their faces to give themselves a blush. As for your 'monsters,' I'm ashamed of you, who wouldn't recognize lizards, and humans before their time slinked out of the womb. We will bury these also, though their souls have long been in limbo before today."

That evening at the archbishop's palace, Hardouin sat looking at the stars from a back balcony, his feet propped on a stool. The constellation Aquila, which the Arabs named *al nasr al ta'ir,* wheeled overhead as if hovering over the long-shafted Wain in the western sky. The good things God made, he thought—all the majestic and diminutive and imponderable good things God made; why were men concerned only with the ugly, evil ones?

He thought with some bitterness that even as a soldier he had not been exposed to the vileness of the human heart in the measure it had been revealed to him as a priest. At times he wondered whether it wasn't to fight a more satisfying, more intense war that he had laid down the sword to wear the cross.

Ben Asher had been a good man. Seated under the sweeping flight of meteors in the night sky, Hardouin could not envision who would want to kill an honest merchant with a keen interest in natural facts. And Alteville, who was an intelligent young man related by blood to Hardouin, found great horror in the fetuses and reptiles kept in jars!

The archbishop sat and pondered, ruminating on the passage from Isaiah that reads, "Here shall lie the night monster, and find rest for itself."

The true monster was in Man, he said to himself as he stood up to leave the balcony for the streets of Antioch.

When he arrived at ben Asher's house, the room where the murder had taken place did not appear sinister to the archbishop, although the light from his lantern shed only a wavering irregular glare onto objects and shapes.

The body had been removed, and so too the *monsters,* but no cleaning had been done to the worktable. Hardouin rested his lantern on it and dipped his finger into this and that little cup. He recognized

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sulfur by its egglike smell, and tartar by its reddish color; plain salt in large crystals filled another container.

On the shelf where the jars had been kept, only two were left, still sealed, which Hardouin observed closely. One of them contained a small crocodile that seemed to smile a long smile of tiny teeth, tail tucked in a curl. The other showed an embryo of some kind, big-eyed and knobby-backed, of a darkish color and difficult to ascribe to the womb that bore it. The embryo too floated in a rather clear liquid, and when Hardouin lifted the jar it danced about. Little scales trembled on the surface of its body: the whole was well preserved and seemed startlingly fresh.

Hardouin hesitated before unsealing one of the jars, and then chose the crocodile's. With a small knife he worked at the seal of the jar, cracking it until it loosened enough for him to get it open. Then he put his nose to the container. The odor was new to him, and he doubted it was crocodile smell. Indeed, it was not odor of putrefaction. It was a woodsy, sharp, not unpleasant odor, and had there not been a dead animal suspended in it, the archbishop would taste it. He replaced the jar on the shelf, and with lantern in hand walked to the alcove where ben Asher had slept. Nothing was under the bed, and at a first examination nothing seemed to have been hidden—or searched for—in the mattress.

In the back of the room a door led to a small kitchen, where a few pots and plates were all there was to be found. Under the raised hearth, rummaging at random, Hardouin felt the shape of a flask, and took it out. It was of heavy green glass, made locally. Inside it—he could tell as soon as he undid the cork—was the same liquid as in the jars. Holding the flask against the lantern, Hardouin saw there was nothing in it. No fetus, no snail, no snake. Carefully he corked it again.

For two days Alteville saw and heard nothing of the archbishop. He had meant to report to him that ben Asher's neighbors were sure there was evil at play, because on the very night after the murder, lights had been seen to flicker at the house's windows. But the archbishop was not available, and Alteville had to keep the information to himself.

On the third day, when he was summoned, Hardouin gave him no time to say anything.

"Alteville," he began, "you're a fine young man and never take time to enjoy yourself. I knew your father in Cyprus, and he was as

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you are, a devout Christian knight. Albeit, I think we should have a celebration in honor of St. Lawrence, whose martyrdom is remembered today. So, let's go down to see what good knights do in Antioch."

Alteville was puzzled, but would not object to the archbishop's suggestion. As they walked away from the palace, without ceremony Hardouin began asking questions about the life of the knights in the city, and how they were faring in Outre Mer. Alteville, who had never been asked, was glad to talk about himself.

Across squares and along narrow streets, they had come a good piece when Hardouin pointed at a low door over which a once-green bough was suspended.

"Twenty years ago it was a good drinking place, Alteville. Is it still?"

"I'm afraid it is, Domine Archbishop."

"And upstairs . . . Are there still heathen women upstairs, with their eyes shaded in antimony?"

Alteville blushed in his tanned face. "That too, Domine Archbishop. I see that Antioch hasn't changed much since your younger days."

"Men haven't changed much since Cain and Abel, Alteville. Tell me more."

Roundabout they went, with much talk of what knights did in the long boring stretches of frontier life. Mental pursuits were seldom sought, much less indulged in. Wenching and hawking and drinking wine remained the favorite sports. On their way back to the palace, once more they passed the tavern with the once-green bough, and this time Hardouin said after a fraternal thwack of the hand on Alteville's shoulder, "For old times' sake, Alteville, and for the glory of St. Lawrence, let us refresh ourselves."

Inside, those of the knights who were not deep into their cups of wine dozed in the heat, stretched on benches, or carved little crosses on the wall by their table as enough penance to order another drink. One or two recognized the archbishop, and with ashamed crablike steps tiptoed out of the place. Hardouin seated himself at a table, and bid Alteville do the same.

"Your Grace isn't actually about to drink here?"

"Why not? I did twenty years ago—with measure, and only once going upstairs—but there's a little more to my life than Mass wine even now. Sit down, Alteville, and speak."

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"I think I said all I had to say. What else would the archbishop want to hear?"

Hardouin ordered two cups of Greek wine, and emptied his promptly, smacking his tongue.

"Well, who's the Norman with the large belly, for instance, who seems able to blaspheme more saints than most good Christians know by name?"

"Why, that's Rollo, a cadet from Rouen. He returns to France this fall to marry."

"I see. And he who's halfway up the stairs, if he doesn't tumble before he gets there?"

"His name is Boemond Courthose, Your Grace. A cousin, I regret to say." Alteville sipped his wine. "Has Your Grace given some thought to the murder—?"

"Later, later. How does the song go? *'In taberna quando sumus, non curabimus quid humus*: At the inn when we conclave, we think not upon the grave!' "

A crash of pottery caused both men to turn just in time to see a bearded knight hold a fellow drinker by the neck and strike him with his fist across the table.

"An ill-tempered churl," Hardouin commented. "Who is *he?*"

"He's a Burgundian. Renard's his name, I forget of which household. He gets unsavory when he drinks."

The hosteler came back balancing more wine cups in his hands. "—And he drinks enough to make up for broken cups," he added, "otherwise I wouldn't suffer him here. Are you a new city administrator, sir?" He obligingly faced Hardouin, who smiled and said nothing, kicking Alteville under the table to keep him from answering.

"Nowadays I'm a rare visitor to establishments such as this, hosteler."

"Well, it's good that you came this once. Have you heard about our *little donkeys?"* He knowingly lifted his eyes to the ceiling. "They'll grind your flour thin."

Hardouin smiled indulgently. "I have, but my mill needs no such help these days."

When they finally left the tavern, Hardouin had heard much gossip, and Alteville was empty-headed from talking. Very quietly he accompanied the archbishop back to the palace, and left him there.

* * *

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After sundown a troubled Hardouin paced on his balcony to and fro. He glanced up at the flickers of starlight dotting the vault above him. "The chambers of the south . . . " said the Scriptures. The Lord God, "made Arcturus, Orion, and the Pleiades, and the chambers of the south."

Hardouin kept his eyes upwards, but was no longer thinking of the stars. Soon he went indoors to read long and intently from the Book of Job.

Every Sunday it had been the archbishop's habit to invite friends for dinner, a privilege seldom extended to the younger knights. Boemond marveled to Alteville about the invitation as they changed their sweaty clothes in anticipation of the dinner.

Alteville said, "For the life of me, I can only think that Domine Archbishop wants to convert the lot of us after seeing us at play."

The dinner, however, was a pleasant affair of venison and chosen wine, of which mightily the knights partook and made merry. Boemond caught himself once or twice on the point of blaspheming and swallowed the words to avoid being kicked out of the reception. Rollo had gone past that point. Each time he riotously took God's name in vain, the archbishop's servants made the sign of the cross and cringed.

Hardouin himself seemed unaffected by his boisterous guests. He poured Renard a tumblerful more. "Cheers to us, and long live Burgundy," with his voice accompanying the gesture.

When all had had their fill and jokes were less frequently heard than snoring here and there from across the table, Hardouin ordered more wine. "A new vintage," he said cheerily to the drink-logged knights, glassy-eyed and with heads lolling on their necks. "Each bottle a special treat, such as a young man of your age I didn't have chance often to enjoy. Taste of the drinks now, a glassful everyone."

Boemond lifted his head enough to suck from a small cup, and muttered, "Chios. God bless you, Your Grace, for serving Chios wine, which is Venus's milk!" and he put his head down again.

Alteville was not so drunk that he did not wonder why the archbishop must so indulge the bad habits of his companions. One by one he tasted all the wines, and some of them he recognized, some he didn't. When the servant poured the last drink, Alteville brought his lips close but would not taste it. "I've had enough," he said plainly, and passed his cup to Boemond.

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Boemond drank obliviously, and only had time to push back his chair before throwing up. The knight to his left also drank, and his face went pale and red and he sought a large draught of water.

The ewer and cup came lastly to Renard, who swallowed quickly and—drunk already beyond control—forced the servant to pour more, in the end lifting the ewer to his mouth and finishing it up. He sank back in his chair then, a grin across his beard. "Good, but it isn't wine," slurring over to Hardouin.

Hardouin set his face serenely. "We try to please our guests. Is it as good as ben Asher's?"

Renard only heard Hardouin through a fog. "As good, and more of it."

The knights, disheveled though they were, sat still at the exchange, Alteville especially, who was near enough to the archbishop to see the hardness of his eyes over the smile.

"More than the Jew would give, eh?"

Renard began to say, "More than he gave before I'd—" and perceived the closing of the spoken trap as he fell into it. He tried to stand up and reach for a knife in his belt but the archbishop's servants were ready to jump at him and did so, and resistance was useless after so much drink, even for Renard the Burgundian.

"The Pleiades, or Sailing Stars, the legend says, were maidens changed into a constellation. That's the pagan myth. We say, on the other hand, that the heavens weep for St. Lawrence every August on his anniversary day, and meteors are such tears."

"Yes, sir." Alteville stood behind Hardouin, eyes fixed to the frozen dance of the stars in the sky. "How did Your Grace think of Renard?"

"You're not listening, Alteville. We were speaking of stars."

"By Your Grace's leave, I appreciate the lesson— But how did you think of Renard?"

Hardouin sighed. "Oh, very well. Always the evil things interest Man, never the good ones. Alteville, it was I that returned at night to ben Asher's house to see if I could find a motive for his killing. It was my lantern's ghostly light that scared the neighbors."

"Yes, but—"

"Do you remember *monsters* you spoke of, pickled in jars? Well, it was the pickling liquid that occasioned the murder. I found a bottle of it in the dead man's house, clean and pure, and took it here to sample it, not without apprehension. Alteville, I was a soldier

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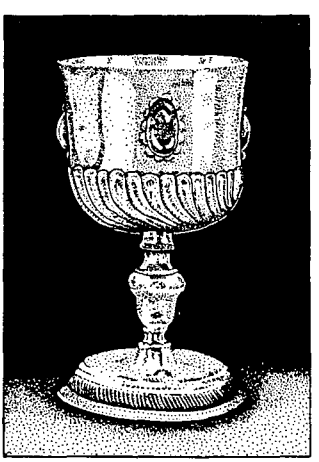
and a married man and a drinker in my young years, but never had I tasted the likes of it. Those two days you didn't see me, I was ill with the drink, *drunk* if you will, as with nothing I ever drank before. I spoke to doctors then—not ours, the Arabic ones—and they told me that it is against the Prophet's Law, but a refinement of the technique has been achieved that makes wine into a much more powerful concoction. It's done with the help of such substances as sulfur, salt, and tartar, and the result is said to halt the corruption of the flesh. Chasid ben Asher, who had a great love for nature, prepared the liquid to preserve his specimens. The drunkard Burgundian must have heard of it, and forced the merchant to provide him with it. When Chasid refused or held back, Renard killed him for it. I knew that in a place such as Antioch only a Christian would be so self-indulgent. Reading from the Book of Job helped remind me of what comes of drunkenness."

Alteville still looked up, though he had been closely listening. He mumbled, "Your Grace is right. The stars are a better subject than the evil that men commit. Does this concoction have a name, that I may avoid it should I find it on my way in the future?"

"Yes," Hardouin said, twining his fingers in a loose cradle. "It is nicknamed by some 'liquid antimony,' which I fail to connect with the qualities of the drink. In Arabic, because you must know a little Arabic if you live here, Alteville, the name is *al-cohol.*"



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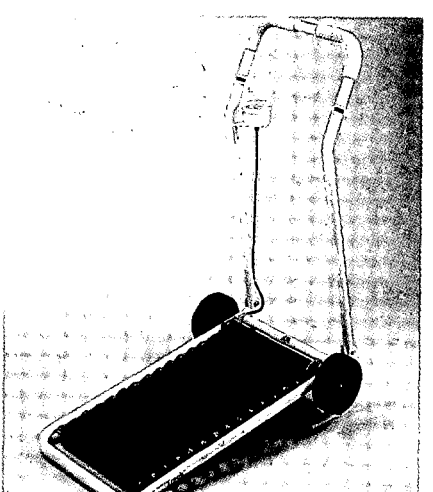

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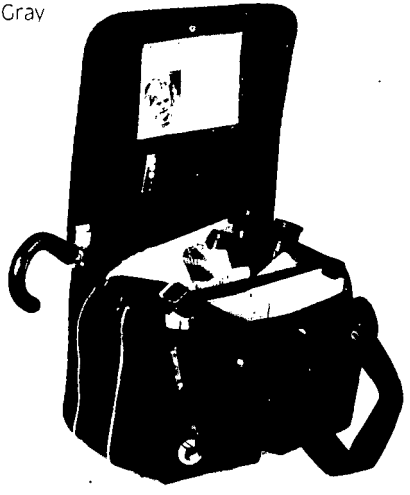

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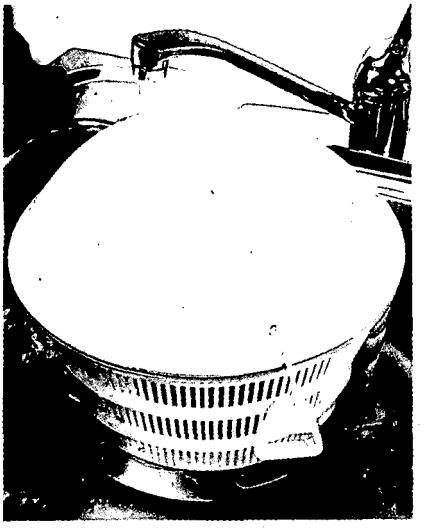

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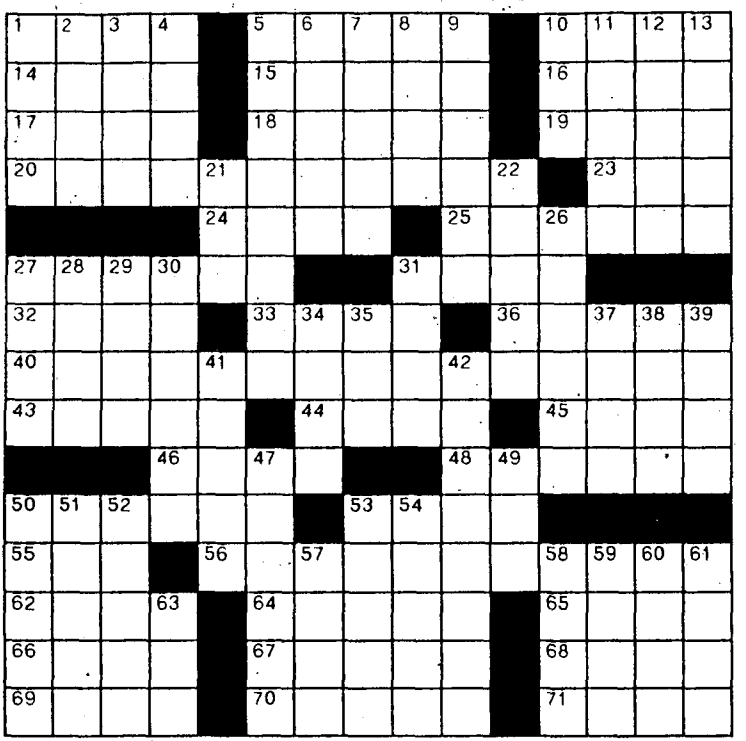
THE MYSTERY CROSSWORD

by Ruth Minary



Solution on page 142

ACROSS

1 Wrote *Recalled to Life*
5 Joshua's lieutenant
10 and 30 Down, "Arthur Hastings"
14 To shelter
15 Kind of dress
16 As to
17 *The Old Man* ——, Simenon
18 Lariat
19 Sheriff's badge
20 "Sherlock Holmes"
23 Resident, suf.
24 Platform
25 One of the Seven Sages
27 Outsider
31 Arctic admiral
32 Individual
33 Virginia willow
36 Mystery writer Donald
40 "Dr. Watson"
43 Realize

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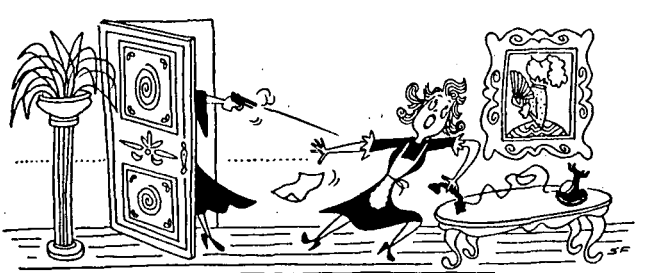
44 Lake or Canal
45 Storehouse
46 Being
48 Seed coats
50 Repeat by rote
53 Pour
55 Portuguese coin
56 "Hercule Poirot"
62 *Bus Stop* author
64 End
65 Pledge
66 Gear teeth
67 Anoint
68 —— colada
69 Else, (Scot.)
70 Stabbed
71 Side order

DOWN

1 Pilgrimage
2 Tennis's Nastase
3 Villain's look
4 —— majesty
5 Draped female pillar
6 *A is for* ——, Grafton
7 Prevaricators
8 Grafted (her.)
9 Actor Warren
10 *Have* —— *Carcase,* Sayers
11 *Wait* —— *Dark,* 1967 film
12 Irritate
13 —— Johnny!
21 Early 16th century date
22 Fling
26 Improvises
27 Namesakes of a Stooge
28 Then, to Tacitus
29 Stitched
30 See 10 across
31 Adriatic port
34 Of —— I sing
35 Precedes ache or mark
37 Begone!
38 Gumbo ingredient
39 Hawaiian goose
41 Plant lawn again
42 Hated
47 Prison camp
49 Australian bird
50 Former host Vincent
51 Place where John the Baptist baptized people
52 Host Diana's family
53 One with the stop watch
54 Roman official
57 In —— veritas
58 —— and Robbers
59 Salute
60 Lab vessel
61 "Morse"
63 Compass reading



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Although she makes her fiction debut here, Vicki Stiefel earns her living as a writer. She is currently the film critic for Worcester Magazine *and a regular contributor to* Dive Training, *a national scuba-diving magazine. A mother of two boys, she lives in Harvard, Massachusetts. . . .*

GINNY'S CURVE

by VICKI STIEFEL

Officer Jim flicked a button. Blue and red lights flashed. Up ahead the Chevy wagon slowed, then pulled onto the shoulder of the road. Jim watched as the Chevy bounced once before settling to a stop. He grabbed his flash, checked his radio, then opened the door. With his right hand he hitched up his pants before proceeding down the asphalt. As he neared the Chevy he heard some country/western song blaring from an opened window. "Baby, my love—" were the last words before it was abruptly switched off.

A whisper of wind ruffled the branches of a live oak and a chorus of cicadas chirped and buzzed. He paused for a moment, savoring the natural sounds. It had been awhile, he thought. Or maybe it just seemed that way. He shook his head, then moved on to the waiting car.

"How are you doing tonight, son?" Jim always thought to start out slow and easy. See what the deal was. He wasn't in any rush. "Can I see your license and registration?"

The man staring bug-eyed at him couldn't be much younger than Jim. He called all of them son, anyway. Jim counted four kids bouncing around the car, the littlest popping his head into the beam of Jim's light.

"Cut it out, Tad." The man poked Tad's head back inside, then handed Jim his license and registration. "Uh, Officer, can you tell me what time it is?"

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Jim didn't chuckle, though he felt like it. After giving out hundreds of tickets, he was used to this game. Tryin' to tell the cop you was human, thought Jim. Some of the younger cops bought it. Jim already knew it. He checked his watch.

"Ten after nine. Pretty late for some of those kids to be out. Right?"

The man chewed on the droop of his pale blond moustache. "I guess. We was fishin'."

"Catch anything?" asked Jim.

The man's head moved back and forth.

"Too bad. You know you were speeding. Doing forty-five in a thirty." Jim pointed his beam at the tires. "I thought I caught sight of some baldies. Dangerous."

The man sighed. "Yeah. I know. Got laid off six months ago." A kid screamed that Sally was pulling her hair and the man turned and told them to hush. Two girl-giggles erupted from the backseat. Then silence.

"I should ticket you, you know," said Jim. "Especially seeing as you've got a passel of kids in the car. 'Least they're all wearing seatbelts, 'cept for him." Jim pointed to Tad.

The man nodded. "I know. He don't pay much attention. The wife's real crazy about wearing belts. I agree. But with Tad . . . "

Jim didn't know whether the man's beaten-dog look was an act or real. Didn't matter much to Jim.

"So," said Jim.

"I can't afford a ticket, Officer. Can't afford it."

"I can appreciate that, son. This curve's deadly, though. You need to think, I mean really consider, how you was drivin'."

"I will. I will."

"She's pullin' my hair again, Daddy." Shrieks. Giggles.

"Shush, you guys. Jeez. This is serious, kids."

Jim peered around the man's head into the car. Everything stopped. He always loved this effect on kids. That's the way it should be. Surprise. Maybe a touch of fear. Then, maybe even admiration or affection. It was all in how you handled yourself.

"You hear what your daddy said?" he asked.

Four pair of eyes stared back at him, three of the heads nodding yes. Tad smiled, bit his lip, then nodded, too. Satisfied, Jim returned his attention to the man.

"I'll be back in a minute. Just sit tight." Jim walked back to the squad car. This was getting to the good part. Give them time to

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think. To realize how much money was involved. And how many accidents people caused coming around this curve fast as all get out. Caused some deaths, too.

Jim sat in the squad car. He wiped the greasy sweat from his neck with a handkerchief, then rested the square of cloth on his knee. The cotton was thin, with a small hole burned in the corner from one of his old partner's cigarettes. He rubbed his embroidered name, Officer Jim Donahue, with the pads of his fingers, then traced the stitches that said, "From your loving daughter, Ginny." She'd made it for him in girl scouts. So long ago. He was glad they'd cremated her. 'Least she wasn't rotting in the ground.

He neatly folded the handkerchief and made a mental note to wash it when he got home. He opened the car door.

The man stared up at him. The children sat quietly in their seats. Jim pulled out his book and the man's eyes pleaded a question. Jim kept his face poker-straight.

"You know how much this ticket is for?"

The man's head shook back and forth.

"One hundred fifty dollars."

The man nodded once, then swallowed hard.

"Well . . . " This was the best part, the fun part, watching the changing expressions flicker over a face. "I ain't gonna write you no ticket." Relief. Gratitude. Wonder. "I'm gonna give you a warning." More throat swallowing. The kids stayed quiet, but he knew they were listening. "You're not gonna speed again around this curve, or on this road, are you?"

"No, Officer."

"And for that hundred fifty dollars, you're gonna buy a new set of tires. Keep them kids safe."

"Yes, sir."

"Get going, now. Get them kids home. And make sure Tad wears his belt."

"I will." The man mumbled his thanks. Repeated it.

Jim watched the car pull out. He felt that familiar burst of satisfaction. He'd done a good job. An important job. He hitched his pants up before returning to the squad car and driving back to his spot. He took out his thermos of coffee, settled in and waited.

He stopped two more cars. Had to ticket one. Dumb out-of-staters didn't get it.

The black Saab whipped by doing at least sixty. On this curve, too, thought Jim. He shook his head, pulled out the squad car, and turned on the flashers.

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He saw a small animal trot across the road up ahead. The Saab didn't brake. Jim swerved around the carcass and picked up speed.

The Saab was slow coming to heel, but it finally pulled off the road onto the shoulder. Jim walked over to the car. He heard some cool jazz blaring from the speakers. He loved jazz.

He shined his beam into the car. The woman turned the music down, but not off. She flicked her black hair away from her face. When he asked to see her license and registration her red lips curled into a smile.

"Now, Officer, why would you be wantin' those?"

"Because you were speeding, ma'am. You see that animal you run over back there?"

Her smile widened. She had beautiful, bright, white teeth. "Now of course I didn't hit any animal. I would have felt it."

"Ma'am, there's a body laying in the road. Small, furry thing. What if it's some kid's cat?"

She shrugged.

"You don't feel nothin' about this, do you?"

"Look, Officer, I have an important engagement to attend this evening. I'm late. And I still don't believe I hit anything."

Jim asked to see her license and registration again.

"Now, Officer, I bet y'all didn't even time me on radar, did you?" Her voice dipped and swayed, like the sultry tune playing on the piano.

Jim knew just what she was all about. And he'd already noticed the fancy radar detector stuck on her dash. "No, ma'am, I didn't get you with my radar gun. But this here's a thirty-mile zone. You were burning rubber. This curve's danger—"

"I wasn't. Look, I'm late. I've got ten minutes to get to where I'm going. I'll never make it in time. I'm leaving." She started to push the shift into gear.

"You're not going nowhere, ma'am, till we clear this thing up."

"Bull." Those pretty lips pulled into a snarl. "I'm sure I was going no more than thirty-five. And that ridiculous story about the animal. With those glasses on . . . Well, your eyes couldn't be too good in the dark."

Jim chewed on his bottom lip. That familiar, anxious feeling pushed at his chest. He was just trying to do his job. Keep people safe. He'd been at it a long time. Didn't need the reminder about the glasses. Didn't like doing what he knew he had to do if she kept up with this. But the law was the law. He repeated his children's

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and grandkids' names to force himself to calm down.

"Now, ma'am, you *were* speeding. Hand over your driver's license and registration. Please."

Her now-angry voice grated like a shovel hitting rock. "I was not. Look, my husband's a lawyer."

"I don't care if he's the chief pooh-bah, ma'am."

"You can't talk to me like that, you old man. I wasn't speeding. You're full of it. . . ."

It took him this long to register the alcohol on her breath. His nose was going bad, too, just like everything else. Stupid woman, driving this curve, drunk, arrogant. Didn't she realize what could happen? Didn't she know the law?

" . . . did you hear me? We'll sue. Police harassment."

"Ma'am, you've been drinkin'." He fiddled with the pencil in his right hand. He hated this part. "I'd like you to get out of the car, please. I'm gonna have you walk the line."

"Like hell I will. Drinking? Don't be absurd." She laughed, then hiccoughed once. She reached into her purse. Jim tensed. She pulled out a wad of bills and wagged them in front of his face.

"I'd like you to put those away, then get out of that car."

"Oh, come on, big guy." Her eyes glittered. She smiled a drunk's smile, then waved the bills again, like you'd tease a dog with a bone. "Come on."

He put his hand on her shoulder. "Put that away now, ma'am. We're gonna walk a bit. See how you do."

She jammed the money back in her purse. "Like hell. I see the way you're staring at me. I know your type. You stop women to see if there's any action. Well, you stopped the wrong girl this time, mister." She gripped the steering wheel and pushed the stick into first. "Sexual harassment charges, I figure. Get outa my way. Now." She turned the wheel. "You'll be sorry you ever met me, you dope. It's pathetic, the way you're leering—"

Jim pulled out his Smith & Wesson .38 and shot her between her angry black eyes. She jerked back, caught the steering wheel, then slumped toward him. Her head lolled out the rolled-down window, shiny black hair curtaining her face.

He shook his head as he stared at her. "You shouldn'ta speeded around Ginny's curve all tanked up like that. Your husband's a lawyer, you oughta know the law." He hitched his pants up before he started back to the patrol car.

* * *

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A siren whined, then shrieked as a car rammed to a halt across from the Saab. The car's whirring red bubble painted the dead woman's head crimson.

"Told ya," said the man in the corduroy jacket.

"You were right," said the other man. "Jim got another one. Isn't he somethin'?"

The two men walked over to Jim's car.

"Hey, Jim."

Jim sat in the patrol car filling out forms. He looked up. "Hey, it's Tommy and Jeff. You boys here to clean up?"

Tommy nodded. "Hell of a job. Got yourself a DUI, huh?"

"Yup. She," he pointed to the dead woman, "was a bad one. Same as Ginny's killer. Talk about sass. Wouldn't give me her license or registration. Hit some poor animal. Didn't care one bit. Refused to walk the line." Jim shook his head. "I tried to reason with her. She wouldn't have any of it. Some people don't believe the law could ever come down on them. I called for pickup." Jim finished his paperwork.

Tommy Spero laid a hand on Jim's shoulder. "You did good, Jim. You know, I think you got the highest body count so far this month. You seem to catch the bad ones. It can be tough, shooting them the way you have to."

"I know. But I keep seeing Ginny's face. Makes me strong."

"Vinnie's coming to take over your spot. Tired?"

Jim smiled. "Yup. Hard night's work. But a good one."

"Yeah, a good one."

"Ya know," said Jim, "I had a real nice fella tonight. Had a passel of kids. Real respectful. See, he was taking Ginny's curve a mite too fast, but . . . "

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a *NEW* short story by

MARTIN EDWARDS

Always ready for a diversion from the routine of his legal practice, Martin Edwards's solicitor-sleuth Harry Devlin is in his element when faced with an impossible crime. This time Harry's on the trail of a missing husband when the absconder disappears into thin air . . .

IT'S IMPOSSIBLE

by MARTIN EDWARDS

"It's impossible!" said Anita Morse.

Genuine bewilderment creased her smooth forehead and she spread her arms wide, as if hoping that Harry Devlin would be able to contradict her. But he felt equally mystified.

"He simply vanished into thin air!" she continued. "One moment he was there, the next minute gone." She pushed a hand through her thick dark hair and Harry sensed she was close to tears. "It was like a conjuring trick, a piece of magic. And now here am I, left to pick up the pieces and not having the faintest idea of what to do—or where I stand legally."

The question of law would prove tricky enough, but it was the mystery that fascinated Harry, and the need to find a solution to Anita Morse's human tragedy.

"I'll be glad to advise as best I can. I realise it's a difficult time for you, but I do need to know a few details."

"I understand," she said. She was a slim, neatly turned-out woman with the oval face of a Madonna. He guessed she was in her late twenties, although her serious manner made her seem older.

Carefully, he said, "Is it possible—that there might be another woman?"

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She bit her lip and he could tell she had asked herself the same question a hundred times before. "I simply can't believe that. Tony and I were always content together. I've never been—unwilling, if you know what I mean. Not that he was a demanding man. On the contrary, he was always gentle and considerate. That's what makes the whole business so extraordinary, why it came as so much of a shock."

"You have no children?"

"We both agreed it was too early. We've been married four years, we'd known each other for three before that. Neither of us had had a steady relationship until then. We wanted to enjoy our time together, get settled in a comfortable way of life, before we started a family."

"And you have worked as a credit controller during that time?"

She nodded. He could imagine that she would be good at the job, well-organised and persistent. Even dyed-in-the-wool Liverpudlian debtors would not find it easy to fob her off with yet another hard-luck story.

"We had a decent income. In fact, I'd even suggested to Tony that the time was approaching when we could turn our minds to trying for a baby."

"And how did he react to that?"

She sighed. "Tony's a very calm man, Mr. Devlin. He never rants and raves. He reacted as he reacts to most things, by nodding and seeming to agree."

"You didn't have many rows?"

"Oh, never. We don't—didn't—believe in them. We both thought a marriage where the couple throws plates at each other is doomed to failure."

Harry's own short married life had been punctuated by explosive arguments and his wife had left him, just as the quiet diplomat Tony Morse had left Anita. One thing he had learned over the years was that there was no secret formula for making a relationship between two human beings work. He had come to believe it was all a matter of luck.

"Even so, I wonder if it's possible that he may have met someone else."

"I'm not a fool, Mr. Devlin. I have racked my brains, asking myself if that may have happened. And I did wonder about his landlady, for instance, much as I'm sure she wasn't the kind of woman he

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would look at twice. But I simply can't credit it. He simply isn't the *type.*"

Harry said nothing. In his experience of marital infidelity, there was no type. Anyone could have an affair.

"And in any case," she continued, "that doesn't explain the way in which he simply vanished from sight."

"Let's talk about that. You say he disappeared on the last day of last month?"

"Absolutely out of the blue. He simply didn't come home from work."

"What did he take with him?"

"Only the clothes he stood up in, together with a suitcase of personal items."

"Money?"

"He will have had a few pounds on him, not much more. We'd always agreed that I should look after the finances. Tony never had much idea about handling cash. Strange, you would think a computer programmer would be at ease in dealing with figures, but he left all the incomings and outgoings for me to attend to."

"What about his job? He worked for Monumental Mail Order, didn't he?"

"Since leaving school. They are excellent employers, as you well know. Of course, I contacted them straight away, but he'd not given anyone a clue that he was leaving. Didn't hand in his notice or anything like that. He simply stopped turning up. George, his line manager, was amazed. Tony was always the soul of reliability, he had a first-class attendance and timekeeping record. His annual appraisals often said what a sound and steady worker he was."

"Until one day he walks out on the job and on you."

"Yes—and I simply didn't know where to turn. I called all the hospitals, even brought in the police, though they didn't show much interest. They obviously decided Tony had done a flit. I tried to explain what he was like, but they didn't want to listen. Too much trouble, I expect. He had simply not left a clue as to where he had gone or what was in his mind."

"And he'd never done anything like this before?"

"Heavens, no. Tony is—was . . . do you see, I don't even know which tense to use! Imagine—my own husband and I haven't the faintest idea whether he is alive or dead!"

She dabbed at her eyes with a lacy handkerchief. "Sorry," she said after a while in a muffled tone.

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Harry leaned across the desk. "Please don't worry about it. Sometimes we all feel better for a good cry. Now, do you feel up to telling me a little more about how you came to see Tony again?"

"It was several days ago. Ever since he had gone, I'd been drifting through life in a daze. I simply couldn't take in what had happened. I went to the building society on my lunch hour and as I walked down Castle Street towards where my car was parked, I saw him. He was walking along the other side of the road."

"Did you approach him or call to him?"

"No, I was in too much of a state of shock. For a few moments, I wondered if I was dreaming, but I had to believe the evidence of my own eyes."

"It couldn't have been someone who bore a close resemblance to Tony?"

"No, I'm sure of that. Besides, he was wearing the same jacket and trousers he had on for work the day he left."

"So you followed him?"

"He jumped on a bus heading for Mossley Hill. I—I had to make a quick decision. So I got into my car and trailed behind it, keeping a close watch on whether Tony got off at any of the stops."

She shook her head, as if amazed that she had found herself in a situation straight out of a television thriller. "He went as far as the area where you find most of the university's halls of residence. Then he walked up a side road to one of those large Victorian semis that you find in that part of the city. It was built on a corner plot and when he marched towards the front door, I parked by the side of it, on the opposite side of the road."

"Had Tony seen you?"

"Not until then. But as he unlocked the door, he glanced over his shoulder and he may have seen my car. Certainly, he didn't waste any time getting inside."

"So what did you do?"

"Sat in the car for a few minutes, wondering about my next move. You can imagine how I felt, Mr. Devlin. I'd convinced myself that my husband had been kidnapped or murdered—and then I see him, as large as life, wandering around the city as if he hasn't a care in the world. I was angry and confused and upset. But I decided I must confront him."

"So you called at the house?"

"Yes, but before I tell you about that, I must explain that I could see the house, both front and back, from my car. The fence which

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divided off the back garden was low, so from my vantage point I had a good view of all the grounds." She leaned forward earnestly. "Mr. Devlin, I can assure you that Tony did not leave that building before I rang the bell at the front door."

"Who answered?"

"A young girl, Asian, presumably a student. 'Where's my husband?' I asked, but she looked at me as though I were mad. When I brushed past her, she came after me, protesting, but I kept opening doors and looking inside. I was like a woman possessed. I even went into rooms and took a look underneath a couple of the beds and inside the largest wardrobe. I knew it was wrong, but I was desperate. I was so certain that I would find Tony somewhere, cowering out of sight."

"But you didn't."

"No, there wasn't a sign of him. I asked the girl how many people lived there and I gathered from her replies that it was a shared house. The woman who owned it lived in and took lodgers to help with the mortgage. Most of the tenants were students, like the girl."

"Who was in there at the time?"

"The other people were out, pursuing their studies, I suppose."

Not unless things have changed since my student days, thought Harry, but he kept it to himself.

"I asked the girl if she knew Tony Morse, but she gave me a blank look. I was fairly sure the name meant nothing to her. I was almost on the point of giving up—and then, on the first floor, I found something which convinced me that he had been living there. The woman who owned the place was obviously an artist and there were paintings all over the house, reproductions of Dali and Jackson Pollock mixed in with present day oils and watercolours. But upstairs were hanging two of Tony's own pictures."

"So he was a painter in his spare time?"

"It was just a hobby," said Anita. "Although I'm afraid it was a rather time-consuming one. He didn't have much opportunity to paint after we got married, but I think it was enough for him that we were together. Those two scenes dated back to his university days; he was always very attached to them. We had them on our own living-room wall until we redecorated last year and they didn't fit in with our new colour scheme. After that, he put them away."

"Had you realised they were missing from the house?"

"It never crossed my mind to look. I can only assume he took them when he left, but I simply can't be sure."

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"They were landscapes?"

"Oh yes, and pleasant enough in their own way. Tony was hardly a Constable or a Turner, but he was competent enough as an artist. One showed Sefton Park in winter, the other was a view of the Mersey and the Liver Building."

"What did you do when you saw them in the house?"

"I knew then I was right in believing it was Tony I had seen entering the house. And I hadn't seen him leave by a back door. So I pressed the girl for the truth, but she stuck to her story. She said she had only been living there a few days and she'd never even noticed the pictures before. She lived in a downstairs room and had never had a reason to go up the stairs."

"So you continued your search?"

"Yes. I think the girl realised I wouldn't give up. But as I went up a second flight of stairs, she asked me to stop again. She said her landlady's quarters were up there and she didn't want to get into trouble for having let me roam about the house without permission. I told her not to be so silly. If I couldn't find Tony, perhaps the landlady was the next best thing."

"And what did she have to say?"

Anita blushed. "We had an unorthodox introduction. I looked in the landlady's room and the little attic studio she had up there, but I couldn't see her—or any trace of Tony. The door adjoining the bedroom was closed, but when I pushed it, I found it wasn't locked. Unfortunately, it was the bathroom—and the woman was in there, having a bubble bath."

Harry fought to suppress a smile. Who had been more startled by the sudden encounter, he wondered, the meek little wife in hot pursuit of her errant spouse or the landlady quietly scrubbing her cares away in the privacy of her own home?

"So what happened?"

"Of course, as she heard the door open, she screamed—and so did I. The Asian girl was right behind me and she was yelping in panic as well. It was pandemonium. Naturally, I shot out of the place that moment."

An idea occurred to Harry. "A bubble bath, you say? I don't suppose—Tony could have been hiding in there out of sight?"

Anita looked horrified. "I can assure you, Mr. Devlin, he couldn't have been there. Tony is a very bashful man. Straitlaced, even. There is no way he would have been in the bathroom with that woman."

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"Even so," suggested Harry patiently, "people do strange things. Perhaps . . . "

"Besides, the bath was simply too small. Although I only caught sight of it for a moment, I would stake my life on that. The room itself was cramped and there was only space for the loo, wash basin, linen basket, and tub. Tony isn't a huge man, but however tiny the landlady was, no one else could have fitted in there with her."

"What did you do then?"

"What could I do? I spoke to the woman through the bathroom door. My heart was beating so fast I thought I was going to die myself. I told her that I'd seen my husband entering her house and that I was in despair of finding him. She sounded angry and as if she had a cold. Certainly, she wasn't in much of a mood to cooperate, but she did say she had no idea where he could be, even though I could tell that she knew the name. I asked if he was a tenant and she said yes, but he'd told her he was going that afternoon. He'd paid up and she thought she might have heard the back door slam a few minutes earlier."

"Did you believe that?"

"I didn't see any reason for her to lie. I thought perhaps I'd missed him somehow. So I raced downstairs to have a look at the back door, to see if by some miracle there was a sign of him. The Asian girl was still on my heels, but of course I couldn't find a trace of Tony. One thing I did confirm, though, was that the place where I had parked the car was the perfect spot to see any comings or goings from that door. I couldn't imagine how I had failed to notice him."

"Was there any other exit?"

"In the kitchen I saw a door leading down to a cellar. Again I thought I'd cornered him, but it was a dead end. The place was full of coal and although there was a trap door outside, half a ton of slack blocked that way from the house. No one could have escaped by that route."

She gazed into Harry's eyes. "By this time, Mr. Devlin, I felt the fates were conspiring against me. I slumped down on the kitchen chair and wept. The Asian girl was kind. She told me her name was Jasmine and she offered to make me a cup of tea. But I could tell she was anxious about how her landlady was going to react if she found the stranger who had burst in on her sitting at the table and making herself at home. I couldn't face another embarrassing confrontation. Tony wasn't there, I'd proved to my own satisfaction. So, with my tail between my legs, so to speak, I simply slunk away."

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"You can't have looked in every cupboard," Harry objected. "Or behind every curtain."

"All the curtains I saw were drawn. And every cupboard that looked big enough to hold a man, even a man of average height and slim build like Tony, I'm sure I glanced inside. Although the place runs to three storeys and there seem to be rooms for four lodgers as well as the common rooms, it's not exactly the size of Croxtieth Hall. And the furniture was quite basic. There weren't massive wardrobes or ottomans anywhere."

"Perhaps—a concealed passageway?" suggested Harry, although as the words left his lips he realised how absurdly melodramatic they sounded.

"I'm sure not," she said wearily. "I don't think the architects of Victorian Liverpool went in for priests' holes or secret hideaways."

"So—where does that leave us?"

"It leaves me here, without either a husband or a clue what has happened to a happy marriage." Another tear traced a path down her pale cheek. "At least I thought it was a happy marriage, Mr. Devlin. Now my whole world has been turned upside down."

"You went to the house ten days ago. Have you made any other efforts to find Tony since then?"

"I felt sure the answer lay in that house, Mr. Devlin. He's flesh and blood, not a phantom, he couldn't simply have evaporated. I knew I had to go back there. But it took me two or three days to gather my courage. I'd felt so humiliated on my first visit. Finally, I returned one evening. I thought it was more likely that people would be around then and someone might be able to tell me what Tony had been up to. A young man, Iranian I think, answered the door. I asked for the landlady, her name is Heston, but he said she wasn't well. All the same, I managed to persuade him to let me in. The Asian girl was there, as well as a couple of others."

"And the landlady?"

"They told me she'd had to go into hospital the previous day. A minor operation, nothing life-threatening. I thought if she had something to hide, I might be able to worm it out of them in her absence, but I had no joy. All of them were newcomers. They couldn't tell me much about their landlady, except that she'd bought the place earlier this year and had been looking around for tenants. When she'd spoken to the Asian girl after my first visit, she'd told her Tony had turned up one day and asked for a room for the night and had stayed until the day I arrived. Then he had fled, although

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since he'd paid his rent in advance, she wasn't unduly concerned. I can only assume he was looking for a short-term bolt-hole before he made his final plans for a getaway."

"You're in no doubt he deliberately did a runner?"

"I have to face up to the truth. Tony must have gone to that house of his own free will and when he saw me following him, somehow he did his vanishing trick. Heaven knows why, but he preferred to stay in second-rate shared accommodations rather than carry on living with me."

"Might he be suffering from amnesia?"

"Of course the thought had crossed my mind. And I still wonder if perhaps . . . but I am afraid I might be fooling myself. There's just one thing. . . ."

"Yes?"

"On my second visit to the house I had another look upstairs. Tony's paintings were still on the wall. If he had left in a rush when I came chasing after him, he hadn't been back to collect them. And that did make me wonder, Mr. Devlin, because he loved those paintings almost as much as he loved me."

She paused and after a moment of sombre reflection added, "Why should I fool myself? After all, he took them with him to Mossley Hill. He must have loved them *more* than he loved me."

After she had gone, Harry speculated on the reason for the disappearance of Tony Morse. His client had struck him as a rational woman, not given to flights of fancy. Her husband sounded equally ordinary; a Liverpool lad born and bred, devoted to his native city. Anita couldn't imagine him wanting to live anywhere else; although they had both enjoyed an annual holiday abroad, he was always happy to come home. What could persuade such a man to abandon the life he had spent so many years building? Perhaps the amnesia theory did provide the likeliest explanation.

And yet Harry knew that everyone keeps secrets even from their nearest and dearest. No one knows another person's full story. There might be something in Tony Morse's past, for instance, of which prim and proper Anita was wholly unaware. Might it now have caught up with him?

Her devotion to her husband was not in question. When Harry had asked whether she wanted a divorce, dismay had spread across the oval face like a stain. What she wanted was to have her man back—or at least to be given some clue as to why the marriage she

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had thought so strong seemed to have sunk into a swamp of betrayal and despair. Harry sensed she was not ready even now to contemplate a legal parting of the ways—that was why she had waited for a while before coming to see him. She must have been hoping for a miracle to happen, for Tony to return and for everything to be as it had been before. Only slowly was it dawning on her that the odds were against any return to the way things had been. She had come to Harry as much for solace and a shoulder to cry on as for his professional expertise.

He'd done his best to console her and now he determined to do more to help. He wanted to uncover the reason for Tony Morse's disappearance. Not that he deceived himself that his motives were purely altruistic: he had become fascinated by the mystery and it would continue to nag at him until he found the solution.

Tony Morse had been—perhaps still was—a respectable man. He might not be streetwise or fully aware of all the ways in which a person who is so minded can slip out of society's sight. If he had simply upped and left to start a new life elsewhere, it might be possible to make enquiries and trace him via his national insurance number. Harry had tracked down plenty of runaway spouses and lovers in his time and he had promised to make the usual checks.

Yet what intrigued him most was the immediate puzzle: how had Tony managed to evade his wife when she followed him to the house in Mossley Hill? Several possibilities sprang to mind, but most depended on the assumption that Anita had been less thorough in her search than she had claimed. And Harry thought that unlikely: the woman had struck him as thorough and persistent; not a leaver of unturned stones.

Only one thing for it: he must go to the house and take a look for himself. As soon as the idea came to him, he knew he would be unable to resist it. Apart from anything else, he had a pile of papers from the Law Society to fill in. They wanted to know if he was a fit and proper person to give clients advice on legal aid. Harry had a sneaking suspicion that if the bureaucrats ever came round and caught sight of the mound of paperwork that spilled from every flat surface in his room, there could be only one conclusion. He shoved the questionnaire to the bottom of a drawer and rang through to Suzanne on switch.

"I'm going out to Mossley Hill. I may be some time."

He replaced the receiver so as to cut off her objections in mid-sentence and hurried out to his car. The journey to the address Anita

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had mentioned took a quarter of an hour and he parked in the same spot as that which she had described so clearly.

She was right: for surveillance of the house, it was ideal. Over the low fence he could see not only the patio of the immediate rear of the house but also the rest of the smallish garden. Half of it comprised a large bed of tightly planted annuals, gaudy reds and yellows. Anita had said that, even if she had missed seeing someone shin down a drainpipe or drop out of a window, it would be impossible to cross the flower bed without treading down a few plants on the way. But the whole bed had been unscathed. Now that he could see the scene for himself, Harry understood why she could not accept that she had missed Tony fleeing from the house.

So—had he managed to hide himself inside? There was only one way of finding out and that was to take a look for himself. No point in being bashful about it. Harry marched up the front path and squeezed the doorbell.

As he waited, he weighed up the place. Although semi-detached, it was a decent size. A century earlier people had built on a more generous scale than today. The woodwork had recently been repainted and the curtains at the ground-floor windows seemed smart and new. He remembered that the landlady had bought the place not long ago; she was evidently doing her best to make improvements.

He heard footsteps approaching before the door swung open to reveal an olive-skinned young woman wearing a university sweatshirt and jeans which flattered her slender figure.

"Is Ms. Heston in?"

"I'm afraid she's out at present. Can I help?"

"My name's Harry Devlin. I work as a solicitor in the city centre and I've been consulted by a woman called Anita Morse."

"You mean—the woman who came here saying she'd seen her husband coming into this house?"

"That's right—although, of course, the man then seems to have disappeared and I am sorry to say that he is still missing."

The girl nodded. "It was very odd. I did wonder if—perhaps your client was mistaken."

"She is very positive that she was not."

"That is true, but sometimes, when one is suffering from emotional stress . . . "

"Did you hear anyone coming in a few moments before Mrs. Morse rang the bell?"

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"No, but that is immaterial. For once, I was in my room at the back of the house, engrossed in my work. Would you like to come in? Any interruption from the theology of Hegel is more than welcome."

She led him into a large sitting room with cheap and cheerful furnishings and decor. Posters from the Walker Art Gallery covered the walls. Sitting opposite her in an ancient leather armchair, Harry said, "I understand what you are saying about stress, but I don't believe Anita Morse was wrong. For all that her life has been thrown into turmoil, she strikes me as a level-headed woman. Maybe, whilst she was talking to you at the door and entering the house, her husband might have disappeared round the back."

"I doubt it. If he'd come down the passageway which leads from the kitchen to the utility room and the back door, I'm sure I would have heard him. I can't imagine he would run upstairs and jump out from a window. And even if he had, he would still have been taking a chance. As you may have noticed, there aren't any shady spots outside in which he could hide, not even a tool cupboard. Anyone who doesn't want to trample down Romany's precious flowers is almost forced to leave via the footpath and lawn at the front."

"Romany?"

"Ms. Heston."

"Okay, might my client have missed him in her search of the house?"

The girl spread her arms. "If so, it was a wonder. She was fast but she was amazingly determined. I was in a state of panic as I followed her around the place, trying not to imagine what Romany would make of it all. And then, when Mrs. Morse burst in on Romany in the bath, I could have died with embarrassment."

"And how did Ms. Heston take it?"

"She was startled, of course, but after Mrs. Morse had gone, she calmed down and said she could understand why a woman in such a predicament should have behaved like that. She seemed sorry for her."

"And where is Ms. Heston now?"

"Off to the travel agents. She's going on a short holiday abroad soon and she's picking up her ticket and currency today."

"Any idea when she is due back here?"

The girl shook her head and Harry asked, "Do you mind if I have a quick look around in the meantime, simply to satisfy my own curiosity?"

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She looked doubtful. "I would have to accompany you, of course. But if you believe . . . "

"You saw how distressed my client is."

Nodding, the girl said gravely, "Your sex has a lot to answer for, Mr. Devlin."

He followed her on a quick tour of the house. As on the day of Anita Morse's original visit, all the other occupants were absent. Having ascertained that they were all foreigners with a limited command of English, Harry inclined to the view that they would be unlikely to cast any further light on the case. When he and his guide reached the first floor, he paused at the side of two framed landscapes side by side on the wall.

"Mrs. Morse told you these were painted by her husband?"

"Yes, they are agreeable, I think, if a little conventional. I paint myself and I prefer bolder strokes. Romany is the same, her work is very dramatic. But I gather she likes to have other artists in the house and this man Morse turned up at the right time, when she'd had some work done here and was trying to fill the place to help her with the monthly payments."

Harry looked at the pictures. Much as he liked art, he claimed no expertise. To his untutored eye, it seemed that the young Tony Morse had unquestionably possessed technical ability. How much of a wrench had it been for him to leave these early works behind when he had fled?

Downstairs, the front door slammed. "That will be Romany," said the girl anxiously. "Perhaps I ought to introduce you."

"I'd appreciate it," he said.

They retraced their steps to the hall, where a tall woman with a shaggy blond perm who had been hanging a crimson jacket on a peg spun around as they approached. Her face was equine and her expression watchful, although when she spoke her husky voice was amiable enough.

"A friend of yours, Jasmine?"

The girl made the introductions and Harry noticed that mention of Anita Morse's name caused the landlady to stiffen with tension.

"An extraordinary business," she told Harry. "I don't know what to make of it."

"You reckon my client was hallucinating when she thought she saw her husband entering this house?"

"I can't give you any answers, Mr. Devlin. She was obviously genuine in her distress. As you will have gathered, she burst in on

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me when I was in the tub, so we hardly got off on the best footing. But I don't doubt she's a decent woman and I strongly suspect her husband didn't deserve her. Frankly, she's better off without him. Heaven knows why she's bothering to pay a solicitor to try to track him down. He'll be far away by now."

"She loved him," said Harry quietly, and Romany Heston shot him an unreadable glance.

In the pause that followed, Harry asked, "What was he like?"

"How should I know? I simply took his money. Our paths hardly crossed."

"Come on now. I shared a house when I was a student. People are in and out of each other's rooms all the time—and I don't just mean the bedrooms. Besides, the two of you had a common interest. You even let him put a couple of his pictures up on the wall."

"To fill a space, that's all. He said he had a couple of things I could put up when two of my paintings were sold. But they are daubs, nothing more. I would have taken them down before now if I had the time."

"So you didn't talk art, didn't discuss his plans?"

"Not at all. He was a nonentity, Mr. Devlin, even his wife must have realised that."

"And on the day of his disappearance? What happened then?"

"I'd passed him in the kitchen at breakfast time. We exchanged a 'Good morning,' but there was no conversation. I had things to do in Liverpool during the morning. When I came back in the early afternoon, I felt tired and in the mood for a bath. I forgot to lock the door, but then I didn't expect to be interrupted by a woman rushing in, apparently convinced that I was concealing her husband somewhere about my person."

"You didn't hear Morse returning to the house?"

"I'm not sure that I did. As his wife discovered, he'd cleared out completely. He hadn't brought many belongings with him and he left nothing—except for those wretched pictures."

Harry turned to Jasmine. "I gather you didn't meet Morse at all."

"That's correct, but perhaps it's not surprising. I'd only just arrived here myself."

"I'm sorry for your client," said Romany Heston, "believe me, I am. She seems a decent woman, far too good for that fellow. You should tell her to look on it as a bereavement. She won't be the loser, she still has a nice house and a well-paid job."

"Anyone would think you believed he was dead."

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"Not at all," she said hastily. "Though the position's exactly the same as if that were true. Anyway, I simply can't help you any further. I suppose he's living it up miles from here, probably preying on some other sweet young girl. Now if you'll excuse me . . . "

"Of course," said Harry, "but I only hope you're right and that he is still living."

She gave him another suspicious look, then turned and hurried up the stairs and out of sight.

He was still wondering whether Tony Morse might be dead when he arrived back at the office of Crusoe and Devlin. Suzanne greeted him with the news that Anita Morse had tried to contact him several times during the last hour.

"Said it was extremely urgent," she muttered with the weary scepticism of the longtime switchboard girl.

He returned the call from his own room. "Mrs. Morse? Harry Devlin here. What's the problem?"

Her voice was hoarse with shock. "Thank God you've called. Something terrible has happened. Look, I can't talk on the telephone. It's too serious, too sensitive. You have my address. Is there any chance at all you could come over?"

He did not hesitate in agreeing. In his brief acquaintance with her, he had become convinced she was not a woman to cry wolf. And besides, he still could not face filling in the Law Society's questionnaire.

Twenty minutes later he was locking his MG outside the Morses' home in affluent Crosby. The contrast with the shared house in the student quarter could not have been starker. This was a four-bedroom detached in a cul-de-sac of fifteen identical dwellings designed for middle-class families who prized convenience above character.

Anita Morse opened the door before he was halfway down the path. Her cheeks were white, her eyes bloodshot from crying. Wordlessly, she motioned him inside.

"Tell me about it," he said gently when they were sitting opposite each other in the comfortable living room.

"After I came back from seeing you, I had a call from George, Tony's boss at Monumental. They have discovered a major bug in the accounting software. At least fifty thousand pounds is missing as a result and they are still counting. It seems to have been deliberate fraud and the finger is pointing straight at Tony."

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"Any doubt that he's the culprit? Or simply a conveniently absent scapegoat?"

She looked startled, as if the thought had not crossed her mind. "I wish I could believe that he's been set up, but George is an old friend of ours as well as a colleague of Tony's for the past ten years. He was trying to be kind, to let me know for my own sake, as well as hoping to hear that I had some idea of where Tony might be. Of course, I had to disillusion him on that score."

"Are the police involved?"

"It's not Monumental's usual policy, according to George. They hate bad publicity even more than losing money. Even that kind of sum is small change to such a big company, much as they would like to get it back."

"When was the fraud committed?"

"George has no real idea, but he thinks it may have been going on for eighteen months or more. So much for Tony not being good with figures! My God, I can hardly credit it. It was bad enough when I thought he had made a sudden decision to desert me, but this means that he's been living a lie for a long, long time."

Harry stood up and touched her hand for a moment in a gesture of support. Wandering over to the far side of the room, he scanned the contents of two shelves which added a little variety to the cool colours of the sunless room. A variety of things stood on them: holiday souvenirs and pretty, pointless knickknacks as well as an assortment of books.

"Was your husband much of a reader?"

"Yes, he liked reading, though of course he didn't have much time for it after we were married. There were always so many little jobs to be done about the house."

Harry glanced at the titles and the authors' names. Tony Morse's taste was catholic. John Dickson Carr side-by-side with Jan Morris and Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*. Sir Kenneth Clark's *Civilisation* next to Colin Dexter's *Last Bus to Woodstock*. His gaze travelled along the shelf to a gilt-framed wedding photograph. Anita Morse, lovely in white, was looking with adoration into the eyes of her husband.

"Is anything the matter?" she asked him.

He twisted his head so that he could see the sad woman who had aged so rapidly since that happy day in church. "Something has occurred to me," he admitted. "I'd rather not say any more, if you don't mind, until I've followed it up."

"But . . . "

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"I may be embarking on a wild-goose chase," he said. "It wouldn't be the first time. All the same, I'll come back to you as soon as I can."

He sped across the city in the direction of Mossley Hill and before long he was ringing Romany Heston's doorbell again. Jasmine answered.

"I need to speak to your landlady again."

"Sorry, you've just missed her. She had to go back to the Passport Office."

Harry swore under his breath and raced back to his car. He drove into the city centre with scant regard for traffic lights or no-entry signs and parked on a double yellow line to save time before running past the Town Hall and down Water Street until he reached India Buildings, which housed the Passport Office. He took the stairs up to the doors two at a time.

Waiting in the foyer for the lift to return to the ground floor was Romany Heston, her thick blond curls unmistakable. Seeming to sense Harry's approach, she twisted her head round and he could see fear scratched all over her face. Even before he spoke, he guessed she was aware that he had discovered the truth.

"Hoping to sort out your spot of bother with the passport people?" he asked. "I can see why you had a problem. Our laws are archaic, you don't have to tell me that. To get a new passport you need to produce your birth certificate, but that can raise a few eyebrows when your own certificate belongs to someone you've killed, someone who will never see the light of day again. Once you are born a man, the bureaucrats insist that is the way you stay. Even when you change sex, isn't that so, Romany? Or, should I say, the former Mr. Anthony Morse?"

"Romany Heston referred to Anthony Morse as if he were dead," Harry told his partner Jim Crusoe later. "She seemed to know a little bit more about his wife than I would have expected and her attitude to Morse was oddly hostile, as if she resented him and sympathised with what Anita had been going through."

"So you started to put two and two together?"

"All kinds of crazy ideas ran through my mind. I even wondered whether Anita and George, the man from Monumental, were lovers who had plotted to dispose of Morse for reasons of their own. But I couldn't get away from Romany Heston's house. Why had Morse stayed there and how had he managed to disappear when Anita

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tracked him down? The easiest explanation was that he had gone nowhere. So I asked myself whether there was any chance that his landlady had killed him."

"She might have been his partner in computer crime."

"Somehow I couldn't see that. Her antipathy towards him seemed genuine—though, mind you, I suppose he might have double-crossed her. Everything finally became clear when I visited Anita. Her husband owned a book called *Conundrum* by Jan Morris, a travel writer who famously changed sex twenty years or so ago. *Orlando* gave me another clue; I made the mistake of reading it in my student days. And Tony was a fan of Dickson Carr, the writer who specialised in inexplicable mysteries, as well as of Colin Dexter, with his crossword puzzle clues. I suppose he'd had to suffer a few jokes about sharing a surname with Dexter's detective. When I saw the photograph and recognised that Morse's features were identical to those of his supposed landlady, I realised that Romany owed her name to an anagram.

He picked up a compliment slip and scribbled ANTHONY MORSE and ROMANY HESTON.

"I see," said Jim with reluctant admiration. "So whilst he was preparing to take the money and run, he started to carve out a second life as a woman—even before he submitted to the surgeon's knife?"

"Yes, no wonder he could afford to leave Anita with the house and all its contents—except for his tyro work as an artist, of course. He simply couldn't bear to face her with the truth, knowing she would never understand. I broke the news as gently as I could, but she still looked as if she'd been sandbagged. The only crumb of comfort is that Monumental aren't pressing charges. There's even a chance they might strike a settlement deal. Of course that would mean selling the house in Mossley Hill."

"He must have moved fast to do his quick changes when he saw that Anita had followed him there. I suppose he dumped his men's clothes in the linen basket and threw on the blond wig?"

"I keep telling you, reading detective stories sharpens the wits."

"Oh yeah? He wasn't so smart when it came to walking round the city centre in his old Tony Morse clothes."

"No, but he'd decided to call at the Passport Office in person to make sure they would produce a new passport for him in time for his trip and he thought that if he turned up as Tony, he might find it easier to convince them that he and Romany were one and the

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same. Besides, I gather he wanted a last day of remembering what it felt like to be a man before the operation changed him forever."

Jim shook his head. "No one can simply tear up their past and start afresh. You can't dump the baggage of your old life so easily."

"More's the pity," said Harry. On the desk in front of him was the reminder he had received in the lunchtime post to submit his paperwork to the Law Society without further delay, as well as a stack of correspondence that screamed for attention. He would not be sorry to be free of it all. Nor could he help reflecting on the loneliness of his flat overlooking the Mersey and of his whole life since that dark winter night when a savage man had murdered his wife. To have the chance to scrub it all from his mind and begin again—how gratefully he would welcome that.

But he knew it was impossible. ●

SOLUTION TO THE MYSTERY CROSSWORD

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a *NEW* short story by

WILLIAM BANKIER

Ellery Queen said: "No one in the genre writes about music better than William Bankier." The author's love of music, and especially jazz, comes out in his selection of protagonists, the 'good guys' frequently being musicians or lovers of jazz . . .

STORM WINDOW

by WILLIAM BANKIER

It was the summer of the drought. England had not experienced such weather in years. They played tennis for two weeks at Wimbledon without a drop of rain. After that, it continued one fine day following another. Customers in Brighton spilled out of the Fox and Grapes to drink their beer on the pavement, in sight of the sea.

Getting ready for bed in her father's cottage on the headland between Brighton and Rotting Dean, Annie Maxwell said, "Lotus picked a fine time to visit South Africa."

"Our daughter never cared about anything so mundane as weather," Jellicoe Maxwell murmured. His cheek was crushed against the pillow. Annie's husband was half asleep. "She's in Soweto to set those people free."

Fresh out of university, twenty-two years old, Lotus Maxwell shared a squat in London with three other members of the Socialist Workers Party. They sold the newspaper outside Underground stations. They marched on Trafalgar Square whenever there was cause. Two months ago, she had wheedled airfare out of her grandfather one night after the pub closed and he was counting receipts.

"Big mistake, Dad," Annie told him when she heard about it. "Lotus is twenty-two going on fifteen."

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Now, the troubled mother opened a window, leaned out, and took deep breaths of sea air. Her own difficulties were seldom out of mind. Was it too soon to go up to London again and visit Tim Farr? Jellicoe had not seemed to care last time. But that was only three weeks ago. In the morning, she might give it a try. She would say Daphne had telephoned asking for some help with the children.

It was two o'clock when Annie, who had been twisting and moaning, sat bolt upright in bed. She raised both arms to protect her head and yelled, "The knives! The knives!"

Her husband took hold of her. "It's all right, Annie! You're dreaming!"

When the panic retreated and she was able to speak, she said, "There were millions of ants swarming down a hillside. I was trying to get away. Then the ants became people, men and women. They were so angry. They had knives and they kept stabbing my head. Like needles, all those knives, penetrating my head."

"Poor, poor thing."

"I have a bad feeling."

"It was nothing but a dream." Maxwell hoped there would be no analysis. His wife made a big thing out of psychic phenomena. She claimed to have had premonitions which he did not trust. "You moved it!" was his response when the Ouija board indicator spelled out an answer.

She said she had been other people in other lives. He disputed this, as well. "It's like religion," Annie once explained tolerantly. "If you don't have faith, then there's nothing."

"Of course there's something. It's beyond knowing. It certainly isn't you in leather armor sharing a chariot with Boudicca."

Now Annie got out of bed and went to warm some milk. "It may have been only a dream," she said as she left the room. "But I don't like the way I feel."

In the morning Annie decided to postpone her visit to London. She was not in the mood to see Tim. Two days later, a man from the Foreign Office telephoned with the horrifying news. Lotus Maxwell was dead. She had been taking part in a demonstration, marching arm-in-arm with black students. A crowd of young men from a rival faction came pouring down a hillside to engulf the peaceful demo. There was fighting, five were killed, Lotus was stabbed many times.

Maxwell took the call at two in the afternoon. Stunned, he walked down the steep slope from the headland to the town. Annie was

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helping her father out, working a shift behind the bar. Seeing the pub sign in the distance, Maxwell slowed his step.

Reality kept rising on him like the tide, then ebbing away. He would never see Lotus again. Never toss a ball for her to catch. Never sit sleepily in the wing chair early on Christmas morning, watching the radiance in her eyes as she knelt on the carpet, opening presents.

He was experiencing wild excitement. Anguish was approaching, but right now it was as if he had been given a powerful drug. All was fresh and different. He sensed the old life was over.

As he came through the doorway, Annie glanced up from the taps. She saw his face. Everything he told her in the back room was superfluous. She knew it all, instantaneously.

Fred Carter offered to pay for their flight to Johannesburg, but Annie refused to go. She wanted no part of that society. She only wanted her daughter back. The funeral, seen for thirty seconds on television, was an excuse for more placards, another parade. Lotus was cremated, her ashes flown back to London at government expense. The Maxwells and friends, after a memorial service, sprinkled the ashes on a grassy plot in the cemetery, overlooking the sea.

The Brighton Woodwind Ensemble stood on the hillside and played "Where E'er You Walk." Another clarinetist took the place of Jellicoe Maxwell who, on this occasion, could not face the music. But that evening, in his other incarnation as a member of the Albion Five, he got drunk at the pub and played chorus after chorus of "Farewell Blues" while his father-in-law, Freddie Carter, looked on from the bar, not sure what to do with his disapproval.

When Maxwell got home after midnight, Annie was talking on the telephone. She ended her call abruptly and said, audibly shifting gears, "How did it go?"

"Everybody seemed to be with me except your dad. He thinks I've lost my reason." Maxwell stowed his instrument case, sat at the small oak table in the panelled alcove, and took grapes from a bowl. "Who was that?"

Annie remained distant for a moment, pretending not to understand. Then she said, "Oh. I was talking to Daphne. She needs me."

"You've always been much in demand."

"Class enrollment is way up."

"When are you going?"

"Taking a train at ten in the morning. If you don't mind."

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"You'd better get some sleep." He handled his fear of being without her by speeding her on her way.

She came over and kissed the top of his head. Jellicoe had his music, he'd be all right. He was always away rehearsing or performing; they seldom saw each other. She took a grape from his cluster and ate it. "I don't look forward to sleeping."

"I'll be up soon."

"The dream was spot on," she reminded him as she left the room.

Before going to bed, Maxwell wandered into the library. His music stand stood by the window, and the straight-backed chair with the cushion on it. This was where he practiced. All the lonely work had made this his room. He felt good in here, his existence justified by countless hours of playing the instrument. He honed his skills in these surroundings, made himself better.

The big window looked out on half an acre of lawn and one twisted oak, shaped by onshore winds. There was moonlight. Maxwell stood with both hands on the sill, face close to the glass. "This time tomorrow," he told himself, "Annie will be with Timothy Farr."

Daphne Denton said into the telephone, "What do I tell your husband if he rings me up and asks for you?"

"Jellicoe won't do that. He dislikes telephones."

"What if he comes here and discovers the Daphne Denton School of Deportment has been defunct for nearly a year?"

"Jellicoe is not coming to London or anywhere else. He'll be rehearsing with the woodwind ensemble. Or he'll be playing at the pub with the Albion Five. And after it closes, he and my father will be drinking brandy and setting the world to rights."

"Leaving you to have your way with your hunky soap opera star. Annie Maxwell, you take my breath away."

When Annie put down the telephone, Timothy called from the bedroom where she had just finished putting away her things. "Spare a moment, love? I'm having trouble with the buttons on my jacket."

She came into the room and discovered him reclining on the bed without a stitch on. "What's this about trouble with your jacket?"

"Trouble is it's way over there in the closet. I can't reach it from here."

Half an hour later, he began dressing to go to the studio. Annie said, "Wham bam, thank you, ma'am."

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"I can't be late." Farr relished his continuing role in the BBC daytime serial called *The West-Enders*. He gloried in it, knowing at the same time that he was lucky to have it. Three years ago, he had been messing about in Brighton. Most actors come to London and starve forever.

"Will you be coming back here afterwards?"

"Like a bee to honey." Annie's enthusiasm would become tiresome in time. But right now, he could not get enough of her. Half the fun, he realised, was sticking it to her pompous husband. Farr would never forgive Jellicoe Maxwell for his patronizing manner back home. The musician had never taken him seriously. But the real betrayal was when Farr approached Fred Carter with a proposal to perform improvisations on stage at the pub. Maxwell, who had the ear of his father-in-law, spoke against the idea. The plan was shelved. "Get a real job," Jellicoe had said when Farr confronted him after this happened.

He had a real job now. He also had Jellicoe Maxwell's wife.

"You were good tonight," Freddie Carter said. He enjoyed these after-hours sessions with his son-in-law, counting money, nattering about this and that, taking an occasional sip from the glass of brandy beside him on the desk.

"Thanks, Dad." Maxwell could see through the office doorway into the darkened pub from his reclining position on the chaise longue. The round oak tables on their curved iron legs gleamed in half light.

"Know what I'm thinking?" Carter said.

"Could never guess."

"It was good when Annie used to sing with the band."

"It was more than good." Maxwell recalled his wife before she was his wife, balanced on a tall stool, holding the microphone just below the cleft in her chin as she produced her distinctive vocal whisper:

> " Once I laughed when I heard you saying,
> That I'd be playing solitaire,
> Uneasy in my easy chair.
> It never entered my mind . . . "

"Why don't you ask her to do that again?"

"She'd say no."

"Would it hurt to ask?"

Annie's refusal to go on singing was a deliberate withholding of satisfaction. Maxwell sensed this, although he had never talked

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about it. It corresponded with the commencement of her trips to London to help Daphne manage her classes. "I'll ask her, Dad." He hauled himself up off the couch. "Me for bed."

"Mind you brush your teeth."

A taxi brought him up the hill to the cottage. He never lost sight of the debt they owed Freddie Carter for the use of this place. If required to pay appropriate rent, they could not have afforded it. He let himself in, pretending Annie had decided to come home and surprise him. She was in the kitchen, wearing her old blue robe, sitting over milk and chocolate biscuits.

Silence greeted his calling of her name. He decided not to lie down just yet. He went into the library and switched on the desk lamp. The music stand greeted him faithfully. He was too tired to play any more that night.

It began to rain. A few heavy drops spattered against the big window. Driven by an onshore wind, it began to lash the cottage in torrential sheets. He switched off the lamp, the better to see in the darkness outside. The oak tree was releasing clusters of leaves which raced across the lawn towards the cottage.

He decided to go to the front door, take a look outside at the storm, smell its sweetness after months of drought. There had been no mention of impending rain on the weather report, as far as he could recall.

When he opened the door, he found the same calm, dry night he had gone into when he left the pub. The air was still. A pale moon, three-quarters full, held its place behind a ribbon of pinkish cloud.

"What's going on?" Maxwell said out loud. He closed the door and went back into the library. The storm continued in here, fusillades of rain striking the window like machine-gun fire.

Maxwell picked up the telephone. He dialed the number of the pub. When Freddie Carter answered, he said, "Can you drive up here, Dad? Something really crazy is happening."

"Are you all right?"

"Yes, but you have to see this."

"Can't you tell me on the telephone?"

"Come on up."

The publican arrived fifteen minutes later, parking his vintage Rolls on the gravel by the front door. Maxwell was waiting in a pool of light. "Is it a calm night?" he asked. "Is it clear?"

"Of course it is."

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"Now come into the library."

The men stood by the window, watching the storm. The wind was gusting to gale force. There were hailstones mixed with the rain. "I see what you mean," Carter said.

"Here's what I want you to do," the younger man said. "Go outside and around the cottage onto the lawn. Look in at me and I'll look out at you. If this is not a dream, you should be getting wet."

Carter began to laugh. He headed from the room. "We'll dine out on this one."

A wave of fear engulfed Jellicoe Maxwell. "You don't have to go!" he called.

"I've been wet before now."

Maxwell heard the front door open and close. He waited. He remembered, all of a sudden, a game they used to play as children. It was frustrating and amusing because it had no end. One of them would recite: "It was a dark and stormy night. The rain came down in torrents. Said the captain to his wife, 'Tell us a story.' " And the story thus began: "It was a dark and stormy night . . . " And on and on.

Now here came Freddie Carter into view. He was moving easily. He was not wet! The rain was an illusion visible only from within the room! The publican moved right up to the window, putting his face close to the glass.

Then he froze. His eyes widened, his mouth dropped open. The expression on his face was of shock and horror. He turned away from the glass and ran at top speed around the corner of the cottage.

Maxwell confronted him as he reentered the library. "No storm?"

"Of course not. You're all right?"

"Certainly."

"What's going on?"

"You tell me."

"You won't like it."

"Go ahead."

"I looked in and at first I couldn't see you. Then I did." Carter crossed the room and stood pointing down at the wing chair. "You were sprawled out right here with your head thrown back. And your throat was slit from ear to ear!"

Maxwell knew his wife was staying with Timothy Farr up in London. But he did not have Farr's address or telephone number. What he had was a number for the Daphne Denton School of Deportment.

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This was Annie's cover, her old friend Daphne. When he got past the jealousy, there was something endearing about the clandestine operation carried on with such straight-faced determination by the old school chums. Annie and Daphne had attended Roedean together, the posh girls' school not much more than a rifle shot from the headland cottage east of Brighton.

In the morning, Maxwell dialed the number. Daphne answered after several rings, sounding sleepy. "No school today?" he said cheerfully. "It's after ten."

"Who the hell is this?"

"A troubled parent. But not one of yours, Daph. It's Jellicoe. I'd like to speak to Annie, please."

"Don't be such a wimp. You know she isn't here."

"Of course. I know all about Timothy Farr. I've known ever since it started. But I don't have his number and it's essential that I speak to Annie."

"What makes you think I'd give you his number? Assuming I have it."

"Daphne, try to focus. You know the line in the marriage ceremony? The minister says as long as you both shall live?"

"If you're making a threat, I'll call the police."

"I'm not. You'll never understand. I have to speak to Annie. Did she tell you about her premonition? The dream she had before Lotus was killed?"

"Yes, she did." The voice softened. "That was terrible for you both."

"It's something like that but it involves me. I have to tell Annie."

Daphne made up her mind. "Have you got a pencil? Here's Tim's number at the flat in Chelsea."

By the time the London train made its brief stop at Gatwick, Maxwell had made up his mind. He would tell Annie about the ghost storm outside the library window. But nothing would be said about what her father saw—his own dead body in the wing chair. Not on the telephone, anyway. That image might send her off the deep end.

The sky was beginning to darken in the direction of the city. Was the drought about to end? He decided to change trains at Clapham Junction. The one he was riding on was heading for Waterloo. That station was a long way from Chelsea. He would be better off coming in at Victoria.

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Maxwell ran up and down stairs at Clapham, arriving on a platform where he could board a Victoria train. In this hive of rail activity, he had only to wait for a few minutes. Then he was on his way again, heading into the center of the West End. Would Annie tell him the address of Tim's flat or would she fend him off? A conversation on the telephone would not do. He had to see her.

Midmorning, long after rush hour, Victoria Station's cathedral interior was no longer crowded. He was able to choose from a bank of telephones. He got his wish; Annie, not Timothy, answered when the ringing stopped and he pushed his money through the slot.

"It's me. I'm at Victoria."

"I'll wring Daphne's neck."

"Listen, Annie."

"I never wanted you to know."

"I've known all along. Tell me what this means." He described the tempest seen through the library window, the clear sky outside the cottage door. "I telephoned Freddie. He drove up from the pub. You can ask him. He saw the storm, the rain hitting the glass. It wasn't just a few drops of condensation. Picture it. Torrents of rain like a monsoon, and the tree almost losing its branches in the wind."

"You both witnessed this?"

"And your father went out onto the lawn. He looked in through the window and saw me. But he didn't get wet. The storm only existed from my point of view inside the library."

"That's astonishing." Annie could not hide her fascination. "You've had a psychic experience. What do you say now, Jellicoe?"

"I'm frightened. Can I come and see you, Ann?"

"He's not awake yet."

"Can you come out and meet me?"

"I can't. I turned my ankle on the stairs. It's taped. It hurts when I put weight on it. What's the time?"

"Just after ten."

"Give us an hour. He'll be up by then, he has to go to the studio." She mentioned the address on Cheyne Walk. "It's flat twelve."

Maxwell found a coffee shop. He sat at a table by the window, drinking cappuccino and eating a cherry danish. Red buses came and went from the terminus down the street. People kept glancing at the sky.

When he began walking towards the river, the day was dark as a winter evening. A breeze was picking up, tossing his hair the wrong way, flattening his trousers against his legs. What would be Annie's

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reaction to his story when he continued it to the end? How would she interpret her father's view of Maxwell dead in the big chair?

It occurred to him for the first time that perhaps Fred Carter had been mistaken. For certain, he had several brandies in him. The rain on the window could have distorted his vision, causing him to see what he imagined he saw. But wait a minute. There was no rain on the window outside. The downpour was a phenomenon seen only from inside the room.

Was it possible Fred was joking? He would hardly try such a macabre deception. He left the scene half an hour later, apparently as disturbed as Maxwell himself. Did he have some motivation for frightening his son-in-law?

It was conceivable, though highly unlikely, that Fred Carter was trying to bring the couple back together. He knew about the difficulties between his daughter and her husband. He was not aware of the infatuation with Tim Farr, according to everything Maxwell knew. So perhaps he felt, if he created a fantasy threat, that Annie might move back in to protect the man she once loved.

"I'm stretching credibility," Maxwell said to himself as he reached the Embankment and headed west. "Why am I clutching at straws? Annie has nothing against me. She's just hooked on Farr. She'd rather be with him. I'm her father's buddy. That must bore her to tears. I'm settled in her dad's cottage. It's across the street from where she went to school. And here's this young TV star with his digs in London. Why on earth would she want to stay with me?"

The truth rose from the pavement like a fog and he sucked it in as he made his way beside the river. "I love my music," he assured himself. "But how much do I love Annie?"

Still, he had to see her. He had to learn her interpretation of what her father had seen through the library window. The sky was gunmetal now and so was the surface of the Thames. New layers of cloud were rolling in, each one closer to the earth than the one before. It was a terrifying sight, but Maxwell could not stop looking at it.

He was on Cheyne Walk now, proceeding past rows of three-story Edwardian buildings fronting the river. Ahead was Battersea Bridge stretching across the Wandsworth and the open spaces of the park. It was high tide; a tanker churned past with its cargo of oil to be off-loaded into storage tanks upriver. Scores of houseboats linked together on their mooring at the foot of Beaufort Street bobbed and jolted with the movement of the water.

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He found a block of flats corresponding to the number Annie had given him. It was after eleven o'clock, it should be all right to go in. What would Timothy's reaction be to his arrival?

They had almost been friends once upon a time in Brighton. Actors and musicians can often share a laugh. Envy, no doubt, had something to do with the destruction of their relationship. When Farr landed his big part in the BBC daytime serial, he told Maxwell, "You said I'd never be an actor. Now I'm a regular five times a week on Channel Two."

"I rest my case," was Maxwell's retort.

He pressed the button for flat twelve. A buzzer sounded, he pushed open a heavy glass door and approached a flight of marble steps. Was this where Annie hurt her ankle?

She opened the door of the apartment and limped into the hall to greet him. As he embraced her, she pushed him off and whispered, "He's shaving. I told him you were coming. He didn't take it very well."

"Are we going to stand out here?"

"Come in. But you'd better not stay."

The furnishings and fittings were depressing. A sofa in cracked imitation leather occupied one wall beneath a large, unframed watercolor fixed to the faded paint by snatches of cellulose tape at the corners. The carpet was a dismal chocolate brown. Pale drapes framed a large window looking out onto the river. A fat upholstered chair faced the window.

"What is this thing you couldn't tell me on the telephone?"

"We really have to go somewhere, Annie. I can't talk to you here."

"I'm not going out in that." She indicated the impending storm.

"How can you live in this dreary place when you have the cottage?"

"It's the people. You wouldn't understand. I'm here because Timothy is here."

"Remember the nasty feeling you told me about? When you dreamed about what happened to Lotus. I'm experiencing a really awful sensation right now. I can't begin to describe it."

"You look terrible. What's the matter with you?"

"We must get out of this flat. Even if it's only for an hour."

"I can't go up and down those stairs. Look at my ankle."

"I'll carry you." He walked to her side.

She almost laughed. "Don't be silly."

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"I'm not joking. Let's do it." He bent to put an arm behind her hips, and the other across her shoulder.

"Stop it!"

"Don't fight me, Annie. I'm taking you out of here."

"Jellicoe!" Her voice was sharp and loud. "Keep your hands off me!"

Timothy Farr was standing in the doorway. He was dressed only in blue jeans. His chest and arms were smooth, the muscles pumped. His cheeks were partly coated with lather and he held a straight razor in one hand. "What's going on?"

"Don't interfere. My wife is coming with me."

"Are you, Annie?"

"I want him to leave me alone."

Farr crossed the room. "You heard her, Maxwell. Get out of here."

"Back off." Maxwell pushed the actor hard, using the heel of his hand against a bare shoulder. Farr was driven back against a wall, his head struck plaster. A china dog tumbled from the mantel and smashed on the floor. Maxwell turned again to Annie. She resisted as he tried to take hold of her.

Farr seized a fistful of Maxwell's hair. He dragged him backwards, off balance, the musician's heels making tracks in the carpet. At the same time, with a swiping movement, he flashed the blade of the razor across the intruder's throat. Blood oozed red.

Maxwell staggered, fell onto the upholstered chair. He was in shock. Eyes wide open, unseeing, he stared at the window. Thunder rolled along the river like a loose cannon and, at the same time, a first volley of rainfall clattered against the glass.

Annie was on her knees beside the chair. She reached with both hands towards the wound, then drew them back, daunted by the sight of blood. "Why?" she whispered.

"I don't know why!" Farr closed the razor and placed it on the mantel. "He was grabbing you. He drives me crazy." He picked up the telephone. "Get towels, all there are. I'm calling the paramedics."

Freddie Carter drove up to London. He encountered his daughter coming out of her husband's hospital room. "The nurses are doing something. We can go in when they're finished."

"Will he be all right?"

"Yes. He's stitched up like Boris Karloff. They said we were lucky the artery wasn't severed. The cut was shallow."

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"Where's the slasher?"

"At the studio. They're taping the show. The police decided not to hold him. He's out on his own recognizance."

"And how's your ankle?"

"Not so bad." Her expression turned sheepish. "I was using it as an excuse to stay with Tim."

Carter went to a vending machine where he put in coins and drew two paper cups of coffee. He brought them back to the plastic bench and gave one to his daughter. "What now?"

"As soon as Jellicoe is released, I'm bringing him home to the cottage."

"That's my girl. No more use for Tim Farr?"

"I saw what he did. He must be mad."

"What about the law?"

"There'll be a hearing. Jellicoe said he won't press charges. The authorities may demand some sort of sentence. But if we testify there was provocation and it was more or less accidental, Tim may get off with probation. He has no prior record."

"Lock the bastard up, I say."

"He thought I was being kidnapped."

"I mean for what he does every day in that damned soap opera."

Father and daughter sipped coffee in silence. Then Annie said, "I worry that everything has been my fault."

"I thought you'd say that."

"I had the terrible dream. Days later, Lotus is killed. Now Jellicoe sees rain where there is no rain. You look in the window and see him with his throat cut. He comes to me, and it happens."

"Coincidence," the publican said. "Minds don't make things happen."

"Are you so sure, Dad? Can you explain everything that goes on?"

There was a return visit to the hospital. With the stitches removed, and off all medication, Jellicoe Maxwell settled in at the cottage and got back to work. On his first day, he made himself go into the library and stand at the window looking out. All he saw was the lawn, the oak, the Channel beyond the headland.

For the first few days, Annie stayed around. She made picnic lunches which they ate outside on a blanket spread in the shade of the bent tree. The drought was over; it had begun to rain one day in three.

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After a week, Annie stretched in bed beside him one morning and said, "Hey, you."

"Hey yourself." They kissed.

"Dad's asked me to come in and work the bar today."

"Feel free."

"Will you be all right?"

"Never better."

Maxwell kept an eye on the clock as he practiced. At three o'clock, Channel 2 was broadcasting *Stormy Monday,* an outstanding film. He did not want to miss it. Taking apart his clarinet, swabbing it and replacing the sections in their case, he noticed movement on the lawn. Curious, he went to the window and looked out.

He saw a pair of children playing with a ball. Boy and girl, perhaps two years old, they were dressed in matching shirts and shorts. They were twins. Maxwell rapped on the glass and waved; they did not respond.

Moving quickly, he went to the front door, hurried outside, rounded the flower bed, and looked across the lawn. It was deserted.

Maxwell was smiling as he went back inside the cottage. His heart was pounding. He decided to say nothing to Annie about this one. He would let it be her surprise.

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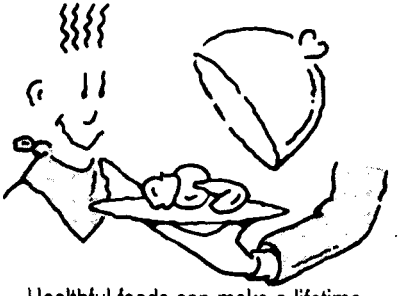

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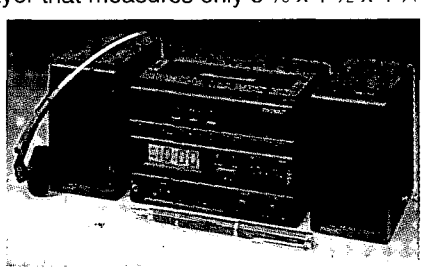

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